Your Humble Servant

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Your Humble Servant

by TigerPrawn

Summary

From abandoned baby to farm hand, from soldier to clerk, Will's life is a twisted road with only one constant, a love he is sure he can never have.

Set between 1896 and 1972, Hannibal and Will strive for happiness together in Your Humble Servant.

NOTE: I'm really sorry to all the guests who enjoy and comment on my works, but due to the ongoing threat of theft and plagiarism by AI tech, I have made the decision to lock all my works.
THIS WORK WILL REMAIN UNLOCKED UNTIL POSTING IS COMPLETE.

Chapter 1

1896

When the bell for the backdoor rang, at first, no one heard it. It was one of those dark hours between the last of the footmen going to bed and the first of the maids waking to prepare the kitchens. On the second, insistent ring the Head Housekeeper awoke, bleary eyed and confused. It was the third ring that got her, and a handful of the other staff, from their beds.

As she took the stairs to the servant's hall, even as she still tied her housecoat, she wondered what emergency brought someone to them at this hour.

At the bottom of the stairs she was met by the equally dishevelled butler, Mr Sugden.

"What's all this about?" She asked, everything having gone quiet since they began turning on the lights. Perhaps it was a drunk who had wandered up from the town and the lights had scared them off?

"I intend to find out, Mrs Brown," Sugden replied gruffly as he ambled towards the backdoor.

They both heard the noise before they got to it, only a little muffled by the thick door and the commotion behind them as more staff came to see what the trouble was. All the same, it was distinct and undeniably the sound of a baby crying.

It was Mrs Brown who picked up the small, swaddled bundle from the crate it had been left in, bringing the baby into the servant's hall despite Sugden's disapproving glare.

Two of the footmen took torches outside but there was no one there, and the gravel of the back courtyard hid any footprints.

"Must have scarpered," Tommy observed, which only served to deepen Sugden's glare.

"And what do they mean by this?" Sugden was indignant. "Leaving a baby on the backdoor of a great house? Do they mean for his lordship to take in someone else's whelp."

"Shh, shh," Mrs Brown hushed, both Sugden and the baby as she pushed a finger into its mouth and let it suck. "Poor thing is hungry. Sally, fetch one of the young master's bottles and warm some milk before he starts to fuss again."

Sugden, a good butler and a fair if stern man, knew better than to countermand Mrs Brown.

"And what do we do now, do you suppose?" Sugden asked. "Are we just to insert it into the nursery and hope no one notices? Tommy, I want you to cycle down to the town and rouse the constable--"

“No,” Mrs Brown interrupted, a stern word but in a tone that would not cause the child distress. “I will not allow a child into an orphanage if there is another choice.”

“Perhaps the police can find the parents,” Sugden countered.

“Parents that have left him here with only these blankets to his name? No parent does that without good reason.” Mrs Brown cooed over the baby a moment more before fixing the butler with a glare. “One of the tenants has been in want of a child for sometime. Perhaps they will take him, and should the parents come for him, they will find him there. No need to get the authorities involved.”

Sally returned with the warmed milk already in a bottle with the teat fastened to it. Mrs Brown moved the baby into the crook of her arm and pressed the bottle to his lips, the teat accepted eagerly.

With the happy noise of the baby feeding, Mrs Brown smiled down at him.

“Don’t worry, little one. We’ll let no harm come to you.”

Seven Years Later - 1903

“Can I help you, my lord?”

Hannibal looked up and blushed when he realised he’d been seen by Mr Graham, peering into his pigpen.

“I, uh…” Hannibal stammered. Almost ten years old and the heir of the lord of this great estate, he knew he should always be eloquent and fair like his father. This, despite the fact that being caught snooping made him feel ashamed to the point of anger. He schooled himself and cleared his throat, but before he could continue the farmer chuckled and shook his head.

“If it’s young Will you’re after, he’s inside helping his mother with the crate. If you’re wanting to wait m’lord, he’ll be taking it up to the big house shortly. He could keep you company on your way back.”

Hannibal straightened himself and gave a curt nod to the farmer, who smiled warmly and tipped his hat.

“Go on in then, m’lord. I dare say Mrs Graham has some tea brewing.”

Hannibal gave another nod and finally replied, “my thanks, Mr Graham.”

The farmer tipped his hat with another smile and Hannibal took his leave, trying not to seem too eager in his gait as he strode over the flagstones up to the little farmhouse.

Hannibal knew from the etiquette lessons his nanny had begun to instil in him that it wasn’t proper to be too enthusiastic or overbearing in a friendship, even as a child. Frivolities should be in measure, and must always be proper.

Perhaps his friendship with the farmer's son was improper in some ways - by virtue of their birth at least. But, at almost eight years of age, Will Graham was the only child even remotely near his age in the near vicinity.

And the truth was, he found Will fascinating.

There was something so different about him, and not because he was a farmer to Hannibal's lordly status. He seemed so unlike his parents to be almost otherworldly, as though he had skipped out of a storybook. And yet, at the same time, he was so grounded. Even to ten year old Hannibal, Will seemed mature beyond his years, and it was often commented on that both of them spoke as though they were simply miniature adults.

Hannibal knew that, for himself, this came from etiquette and being raised as nobility. He could remember all his life having been told the proper way of doing things. His father had impressed upon him a great deal how important it was to fit in amongst his peers given the break in the family line.

That being that the manor and lands were inherited long before Hannibal was born, from a distant relative, causing his father and mother to move from Lithuania where their family line had ended up. His father, titled nobility in both Lithuania and England, made clear his expectation that Hannibal was to seamlessly fit in as a British lord and his heir.

Will had none of that. He might work hard on the farm with his family, but so did many children on the estate and around the town, but none of them seemed quite the same as Will. And Hannibal was sure he had never met anyone smarter.

Will looked up when Hannibal knocked and let himself into their small home. Something he had been doing for a year or more, not that his parents were aware. He was unsure what they might think of it, but it was likely his father wouldn't find it proper.

Mrs Graham smiled, greeting him with a curtsy. She stood next to the heavy table, Will next to her on an upturned pail as they prepared the small wooden crate of fruit and vegetables destined for the Lecter's kitchen and grand dining room.

"M'lord, a cup of tea?"

Hannibal gave a curt bow, always overly formal, and then nodded. "I would like that very much."

"Such a polite lad," she cooed as she wiped her hands on her apron and moved to the stove. "Will, have you nothing to say to Master Hannibal?" she encouraged as Will went back to loading succulent looking apples into the crate.

Will took in a breath and released it as he said, "hello my lord."

There was always something in the way Will said those words that made it sound as though he felt no subservience to Hannibal at all. Not that he cared, he much preferred it when Will called him Hannibal. And, strangely, there seemed something wrong about Will kowtowing to him. Like it was not his natural state and Hannibal wouldn't wish it.

He drank his tea in silence.

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Will let out a heavy sigh when Hannibal left their small house. That pulled a chuckle from his mother when she put the last of the jam she had made into the small crate and covered it all over with a cloth.

“You should be nicer, Will. He hasn’t any friends and he enjoys your company. You could do with friends yourself.”

Will huffed. He might be young, but he wasn’t so young as to not understand the world, his station in life and what that meant.

“I have to be his friend because he’s his Lordship’s son. Like I’m ordered to, like a servant.” Will grumbled.

Mrs Graham frowned.

“We never raised you to be so unkind. Has Master Hannibal ever given you that impression? He certainly hasn’t to your father and I. He clearly just wants a friend near his same age.”

When Will didn’t reply she picked up the crate and placed it into his arms, walking him to the door.

“Be nice,” she hissed at him, firm but friendly. He understood it, he knew the conversations his parents had had about encouraging Hannibal’s favour. After all, such a friendship could stand Will in good stead in years to come. When he inherited the farm and Hannibal inherited the estate, it would be good for them to have a friendship. It could be beneficial.

His parents were not calculating people, but they were practical.

Will walked out and saw the young master waiting for him at the gate, his face brightening up when he saw Will, as though he might not come. Will couldn’t help the strange feeling that smile gave him deep in his belly. A little like butterflies, but somehow different. Something less unsettling.

Will begrudgingly stepped forward but shook his head when Hannibal offered to take one end of the crate.

“I can manage,” Will grumbled.

They walked side by side along the well trodden ground towards the big house, it would take at least twenty minutes and, as with each time before, they walked in a companionable silence until Hannibal was unable not to speak.

“Are you sure you don’t need my help?”

Will huffed even as the crate strained him a little.

“I don’t think playing piano and learning math would make it any easier for you to carry.” Will replied, a little harsher than he had intended.

He took a glance at Hannibal who looked a little forlorn but then brightened again, his eyes lighting up as he saw something.

Will stopped and watched as Hannibal left the path to go to the last of the barns before they left the Graham’s farm.

“Sometimes, brains can be better than brawn,” Hannibal retorted as he reached the old, abandoned wheelbarrow. “We can use this.”

“Wait!” Will started, but it was too late. Hannibal tugged on the barrow and it immediately came off of the wheel and tipped. Hannibal, off balance, fell and the dirty rain water that had collected in the barrow over the weeks since it had been broken, spilled all over the young lord.

Hannibal let out a cry in surprise and tried to get up from the now wet soil beneath him, only slipping further.

It was a hilarious sight and Will couldn’t help but laugh.

When Hannibal looked up at him, Will set down the crate and walked over to him, reaching out a hand to help him up as he continued to chuckle.

Hannibal frowned as he took his hand and then gave a sharp tug, pulling Will down into the dirt with him.

They paused, Will looking at him with shock. But when Hannibal burst out laughing, Will couldn’t help but do the same. And for a moment they wrestled in the mud as they tried to get back up again. It ended with Hannibal on his back and Will over him, laughing still until they were breathless. When the laughter finally subsided Will smiled at Hannibal.

It felt nice to be close to him. He wasn’t someone who craved physical affection, never had been. He might let his mother hold him when he was sick, but little more. And yet this felt nice, and comfortable. Comforting.

The thought of it startled him and Will scrambled to his feet, taking a few steps back as Hannibal did the same.

Will wanted to run. He didn’t want a friend, he didn’t need one. But then Hannibal grinned at him as he tried to brush off dirt that was too wet to be moved, only smearing it into his fine clothes.

Will found he was unable to do anything but smile back.

“It’s broken,” Hannibal said, his smile still wide.

Will laughed at that, “yes, which I would have told you if you’d have listened. As you said , sometimes brains can be better than brawn.”

Will was surprised when Hannibal blushed at that, and he thought for a moment he had insulted the boy who had always been so strangely affable to him. But then Hannibal swallowed and admitted quietly, “I didn’t mean to imply that you’re stupid. In fact, Will… the reason I enjoy your company so much is because you are so smart. I don’t think I’ve met anyone as smart as you.”

Will blinked, thinking back on the conversations he’d begrudgingly had over the last year or so since Hannibal had tried all the more to become his friend. Often he had only snipped short replies to things Hannibal had said, things he had learned about in his books that all seemed very much like common sense to Will.

“I’m not book learned,” Will found himself protesting as a result of his train of thought and at that Hannibal’s smile returned.

“I could lend you some books!” He said eagerly, stepping towards Will again.

Will frowned as he thought about it. He picked up the crate and started walking, knowing that Hannibal would fall into step with him.

“Perhaps we could study together. Or read. Or we could fish,” Hannibal encouraged excitedly, and Will recalled having told Hannibal many months before that he enjoyed fishing. “We could be friends.”

Will’s stomach did something funny, a strange swooping sensation.

“I don’t find you that interesting,” he replied, trying to sound terse. But when he looked over at Hannibal, his expression eager, Will found himself smiling. Hannibal smiled back.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tragedy befalls the Lecters.

August 1911

“Will?”

Will heard Hannibal’s approach before he whispered his name into the dimly lit barn. He might be light on his feet thanks, Will was sure, to the dance lessons he was given, but Hannibal had been unable to stop the barn door from creaking as he entered.

“Are you here?” Hannibal whispered again, though a little louder as the barn must look completely empty to him.

Will couldn’t help the little smirk play across his lips as he moved towards the back of the hay loft, fortuitously out of sight of his friend. When Hannibal stepped forward Will moved ever so quietly to the edge of the loft and then lowered himself down until he dropped with a thud to the barn floor behind Hannibal.

Hannibal turned at the sound just as Will regained his feet and lunged forward.

They were both laughing as Will felled the young lord and they struggled together in the dirt and light hay on the floor until Will was on top of Hannibal and pinning him down.

“You really must work on your physical fitness, my lord,” Will teased. “I am no stronger than any other farm hand and yet I best you every time.

“Do you ever wonder if it’s because I allow it?” Hannibal grinned up at Will and for a moment the mood changed between them. Gone was the playfulness of childhood and instead there was an intensity between them that Will couldn’t name.

One that seemed to increase year on year and hold them together as though conjoined in some way.

They held each other’s gaze for a moment too long and then Will broke the silence by clearing his throat. He moved off of Hannibal and got to his feet before reaching down to help the young lord up. When they were children Hannibal would have pulled him down to continue their wrestling, but that seemed somehow no longer appropriate, and not because of their age.

Will didn't miss how Hannibal's cheeks flushed as much as his own as they stood in an awkward silence that happened increasingly.

"Why did you come looking for me?" Will asked, turning from Hannibal and starting to put away some tools and twine in the storage along the barn walls.

Hannibal cleared his throat and Will knew it was his way of regaining composure.

"I am going fishing tomorrow and need some assistance. Father said to take a footman, but you are the best angler I know so I thought I would-"

"I'm not a servant," Will interrupted harshly. He knew Hannibal didn't think of him that way, but there was never any denying the differences of their stations in life. He would never be Hannibal's equal.

"No, I know. I never… I wanted to."

Will only realised how close Hannibal was when he turned and found the young man standing right behind him. So close that they were now almost chest to chest and he had to look up a little to meet Hannibal's eyes.

Will felt that strange flutter that went from his belly to his throat.

At sixteen, Will was practically a man. It would be only a short time before his family would expect him to start courting, most likely a daughter of one of the local farmers, or perhaps even one of the maids from the big house. But it was that strange feeling he'd had so many times but began to make more and more sense, that told Will that would never happen.

He would never feel that flutter around a girl. And deep within him, he knew that he didn't want to feel it with anyone other than Hannibal.

"I wanted to spend time with you. I'll be leaving soon." The finality in those words brought to the fore something they had been avoiding talking about. Whilst they had been slowly moving from childhood to adulthood, they had now hit a defining moment that couldn't be ignored. Hannibal would go to university and their friendship would be changed forever.

"Alright," Will agreed, despite knowing he probably shouldn't. As right as this felt, this feeling and being around his friend, there was knowledge trying to press to the fore of his mind about what this meant and how impossible it was.

They stood there for a long moment, gazing at each other until Will was sure that Hannibal was moving closer.

Will gasped in a breath and sidestepped away, "I must go. I have work to do. I shall meet you at the path to the river at eight tomorrow morning."

"Yes," Hannibal replied breathlessly but Will didn't dare look back as he dashed from the barn.

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Hannibal flexed his fingers around his rod.

He didn't enjoy lying to his father, but when he had seen Hannibal leaving with his tackle, he had asked outright if he was going fishing with 'that Graham boy'. It wasn't the first time they had spoken of Will, and what his father called an inappropriate friendship.

He hadn't minded so much when they were children, but now Hannibal was eighteen, a man and his heir. It was always good to be friendly with the tenants on the estate, but not friends. There was a line, his father said, and it would be poor of Hannibal to cross it.

And so he had lied and said that he was going alone, some time to appreciate the beauty of the estate before he was to go off to university.

He had simply not allowed that Will Graham was part of that beauty for him. He'd known it from a young age, known that he craved Will's companionship in a way he did no other. He would miss him more than he was sure he could bear. But he had to. He had to put aside this adolescent want and be the man he was destined to become.

"You're never going to catch anything like that," Will teased, dropping down to sit next to Hannibal on the embankment.

He had set up his own rod and Hannibal could see the lure bobbing in the gentle current.

"I was just thinking. About leaving for university. How things will change. My father has been taking an interest in business ventures, mother is busy with Mischa now that she walks and talks, and we will now both be adults and have to set childish things aside."

Will looked away but gave a nod, his smile gone and Hannibal cursed himself for sounding so alike his father.

They were yet to talk about it directly, and in truth it had been the reason Hannibal had wanted this time alone with Will. Away from the farm, from the estate. Away from their lives, as though he might be able to pretend nothing of that mattered.

His meeting with his father had made him realise that could never be the case.

"Will, I need you to know that I'll miss you. My dearest friend."

Hannibal spoke softly and didn't miss how Will shuddered when he breathed. He would be content to leave it there and say no more. It was enough just to have said those words out loud to him. To have them known.

And he would have left it at that had Will not turned to him with such a vulnerable expression, hurt and concern. But something else too, something Hannibal was sure was longing.

He leaned in, a chaste kiss pressed to the corner of Will's mouth before the young man had the wherewithal to draw back. A harsh gasp left Will and he glared at Hannibal. Angry, caught out. Ashamed and upset at the same time, all the same things that Hannibal was

feeling in that moment as well. All the things he knew he was meant to feel, except the revulsion that should come too. That he could not feel.

When Will moved back and then stood, Hannibal didn't stop him. When Will hesitated, Hannibal hoped. But then he was gone, lost to the thicket, his lure still bobbing in the river.

April 1912

"Lecter," Hannibal looked up as the telegram was tossed onto the desk next to him. An odd time of day for post.

Every day he hoped for a letter, every day for the months he had been at university he had hoped Will would send him something. Instead it was a semi-regular missive from his mother that occasionally included a note from his father. The occasional invite to something or other, but never anything from Will.

Perhaps had Will replied to the letter Hannibal had sent before Christmas, he might have returned to the estate for the festivities. But in all it had been too difficult to go. He could not run into Will after what had happened at the river. They hadn't spoken a word to each other, or seen each other, since that day. He had made an excuse to his parents and in return had received a letter from his mother to say it might have been for the best, the house was all in agitation. His father was making some investments in the Americas and they were to go there to meet his business partners and take something of a holiday in the Spring, with a stop at their London house beforehand.

Hannibal was in a limbo now, no longer part of that life at the moment but destined one day to take his father's place.

Hannibal played the telegram over in his hands.

Could it be from Will? A telegram?

It seemed unlikely, and so he knew it must be from his mother. They must surely be in New York by now, he knew they hadn't had firm plans when they last talked only that she wanted to be there by Easter. Even so, he just wanted to entertain the fantasy a little longer that it might in fact be from Will, holding in his hand as he imagined the things Will might say.

A profession of his own friendship towards Hannibal, or demanding an apology for Hannibal's behaviour that day? He was sure he knew which it would be, if Will ever wrote.

He closed the book he had been reading and pushed aside his notes as sat back in the creaking old chair before finally opening the telegram.

Hannibal read the first few lines with a frown. Not from his mother, but in fact from his father's lawyer.

It is with a heavy heart that I regret to inform you that, after several delays befell them in London, your parents and sister they left Southampton on the Titanic- - -

The telegram fell from Hannibal's hand before he could read any more of it.

June 1912

News of the Lecter family's fate aboard the Titanic reached the estate and village before Hannibal returned from Oxford.

Of course, he must have had to go to London first to make arrangements. Will could only imagine what an ordeal it must all be, on top of having lost his family. The thought of it made him ache inside and he wished there was something he could do. He wished he could comfort Hannibal in some way. But he had to shake that thought from his mind, for all the good it would do either of them.

He hadn't seen Hannibal since that day by the river, and Will never replied to the letter he received when Hannibal arrived at Oxford.

There was something of an apology in it, but more so it was friendly. An offer of friendship and hope that they could forget that day. None of it written so plainly as that, but Will knew Hannibal well enough to understand the meaning of the letter. An olive branch and an urge for them to be as they were before that day, to maintain a friendliness that allowed for good relations on the estate.

And that was why he hadn't replied. He didn't want that friendship. He didn't want things to go back to how they had been before the river bank, nor the way they had to be now that they were no longer children. There was no other way forward for them. The time had come for them to grow up from their childish friendship and realise that they were simply lord and farmer and nothing more.

Something that was harder to accept than he realised it would be when he saw Hannibal strolling across the estate little after dawn.

Will knew it was unlikely that Hannibal was aware that Will himself would take an early morning stroll, walking his father's dogs. He'd be equally unaware of the route given that Will varied it day by day depending on his other chores and errands as well as the weather.

And so this was just chance.

One that Will couldn't take.

What could he say?

Will kept to the treeline, willing Hannibal not to turn and see him, thankful when he didn't.

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Hannibal moved like a ghost through the quiet house. For now, it ran as normal, the servants about their duties and everything on the estate functioning as it ever did. With his father's valet, mother's lady's maid and the nanny all gone too, it simply felt as though they had gone to the London house. It struck him as a hard blow every time he remembered that wasn't the case.

He had the passing thought of Will, a distant comfort in knowing he was out there on the Graham farm. As he had been for as long as Hannibal could remember and possibly ever would be, a static point never changing. It gave him as much a sense of home as his own room, or childhood toys, his family.

The thought knocked the breath out of him and he leaned against the wall where he stood in his father's library.

A library he had assumed would now be his. And whilst he had wondered for the length of his journey from Oxford to London, what on earth he would do now that it was all his to manage, he had not entertained the thought that it might not be his at all.

Not for now at least.

The lawyer had explained the particulars of his father's will once Hannibal got to his London office. In order to protect Hannibal's education and give him time to mature into the man he would need to be in order to run a great estate, he had put the estate in trust to be managed by Hannibal's uncle, Robert, until Hannibal was twenty-one.

It was a sound plan. Practicality was one of the ways his father had showed care and consideration and so he knew this had been done with Hannibal's best interests in mind. But it felt strange now, to be standing in a home that wasn't really his own.

And in truth it made him want to seek out Will all the more. For his familiarity and the comfort of something that was just his. If only that were reality and not just something he held in a secret place within his heart.

Robert, once a diplomat but now retired, would be arriving from Japan with his wife, Lady Murasaki, by the end of the month and then Hannibal would return to Oxford. It was all planned out, regardless of the loss he felt and the comfort he desired. Life would go on, just as his father wished.

Hannibal pushed off from the wall with a sigh and took a seat at his father's desk. He would write to Will one more time, explaining the situation and hoping they might meet in person before Hannibal returned to Oxford.

He wrote it, placed it on the tray offered by the butler who would see that one of the footmen would run it down to the farm. He did all this knowing that Will likely wouldn't reply, just as he hadn't before.

Even so, Hannibal had hope. He needed to have hope, or he'd have nothing.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Years have passed since Hannibal and Will last spoke, when fate reunites them in the trenches of the Western Front.

France, 1915

The shelling was some way off and yet the intermittent thuds resonated through the ground. Not enough to shake him, but enough for Hannibal to feel the vibrations in the soles of his feet.

“Sir?” Price’s voice called him back to the moment. The older man had been his soldier-servant since he was given his orders, and now he stood holding out the helmet for Hannibal to don before leaving his quarters and venturing once more amongst his men in the trenches.

He took the helmet and secured it to his head, they had not had orders yet, no new ones. Just to hold this trench, hold this line, until another offensive was planned. It was incredible how boring war could be one moment and horrific the next.

Hannibal closed his eyes for a moment. He lost so many men in the last offensive. He wondered if the dead were the lucky ones. Those that were carried off on stretchers and were now housed in hospitals would die a slower, more painful death as the shrapnel ate into them. There had been no walking wounded that day, not with the shell dropping so close. One whole end of the trench had been buried, and it was only the thrown-up mud that had created a new sort of barrier from the blast that saved the rest of them from the damage.

Hannibal’s ears rang with the gunfire, no longer obscured by the shelling that had finally ceased. He pulled aside the thick curtain and stepped out. It was raining again. Morale was impossible when it was raining, already hard enough to avoid the rot and the damp.

“They’re getting cheeky, sir.” Sergeant Krendler said as he fell into step beside Hannibal. “Nearly had a couple of our lads last night with some pot shots. Still just out of range, and will be unless they decide to venture into no man’s land.”

Hannibal nodded, “thank you, sergeant.”

Krendler inclined his head, “Lieutenant,” he acknowledged before they parted ways and Price caught up behind him as they began their routine walk.

Nearly a year since he had become an officer, and still he found it strange. When there were those like Sergeant Krendler who was one of the men, who they respected and followed, why was he given such a rank simply because of his birth?

The irony was that the last Hannibal had heard from the Lecter Estate had been grave indeed. Whilst unable to touch the bulk of Hannibal's inheritance, his uncle had still managed to start running the place into the ground. His aunt wrote to him and kept him up to date, though the letters were often delayed and sometimes out of order, the situation was clear.

What little he could do about it from here. What little it meant whilst the world was on fire. If he ever returned to that place he must worry about it then. For now his only concern could be the platoon under his command.

It seemed as normal a day as any and yet one moment Hannibal was walking and in the next the air had gone from his lungs. It took him a moment to realise he was on his back, Price on top of him. A rain of mud and debris showering down upon them, hitting against them hard enough to bruise but not bury.

"Price," Hannibal shook the man, his ears ringing. A German shell too close for comfort. It had not reached the trench but exploded close enough to blow out a wall.

Hands were on them both then, reaching and pulling until Price was off of him and they were both pulled from the dirt.

"Lieutenant Lecter, are you alright?" Hannibal only heard the words faintly as he began to regain his bearings.

"Price, is he--"

"He's alive, sir," came the reply even as he distantly heard someone calling for a medic. He felt a dampness in his hair and when he raised his hand to it it came away bloody, his helmet gone.

The pain in his head was blinding and he closed his eyes for just a moment.

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"Don't worry old chap, you'll be back on the front by the end of the week." The Major grinned at Hannibal. All well now but for the small bandage that hid where the shrapnel had glanced him, digging a scar into his hair. Something permanent that would one day be covered by a lock here or there, if he lived long enough for it to grow back.

A few stitches were all that he had needed, though Price had not faired so well. He had taken a hit in the shoulder and it had severed something integral enough that he was without the use of his right arm. It was unclear whether the affliction was permanent, but either way, he would shortly be returned to England to convalesce.

"You're light a soldier-servant though," The major continued as he opened the door for them to step out into the small garden adjoining the hospital. They strolled for a moment, the Major lighting a cigarette and exhaling the smoke at his leisure before finally cutting to the chase.

"I have someone in mind, but he's a bit of an acquired taste."

Hannibal raised a brow, curious.

“He’s an okay sort, a bit rough around the edges. And no training at all. You’ve been spoiled by Price, not everyone is so lucky to have a valet as their soldier-servant. This one’s never been in service, doesn’t much like taking orders either. But he’s as smart as a whip. Might be too smart for his own good, so it’s good we keep him busy. This will do well for him, and your good manners might rub off on him.”

“I’ll do my best. As long as he can make a decent cup of tea I’m sure we’ll get along.”

The major laughed, “if you can get him to wait on you then you’re a better man than I.”

Hannibal smiled and let out a hum, it meant little to him who looked after him whilst on the front. Price had been a great help, of course, but it was war. A valet was not essential whether under the guise of a soldier-servant or not.

“I’ve arranged for a driver to collect you tomorrow. He’ll pick up your new man first and then drive you to GHQ, ready for your orders.”

“Yes, Major.” Hannibal accepted the command with a nod. “And this new man, his name?”

“Ah yes, it's Private Will Graham.”

Hannibal’s head began to pound again, but this time he was sure no shells had exploded nearby.

*

When the hospital came into sight, Will prepared himself.

There was no chance, not even a remote one, that Lieutenant Lecter to whom he had now been assigned was anyone other than Hannibal. With the man’s Lithuanian roots, it could hardly be argued to be a common English surname.

So Will had resigned himself to this, swearing that if in fact it was someone other than Hannibal, he’d eat his hat. Which might be painful since the only one he had worn in some months might as well be an upturned metal bowl strapped to his head.

As the car drew closer there could be no denying it. There at the front of the hospital, stood Lieutenant Hannibal Lecter, a small case at his feet and a porter standing ready to assist.

Will’s breath caught in his throat. He had been trying not to think about why Hannibal might be in the hospital, what horrors he might have faced. And it was a relief to see him whole. He knew, of course, that he had to be. They wouldn’t send a maimed man back to the trenches, but the concern had still been there. Such a concern as he might have felt for any friend.

The thought cut through him, striking a pain in his chest as he remembered the last time he had heard from Hannibal. A letter from him before Hannibal had returned to Oxford after his parent’s death. Another letter Will had ignored.

At first because there was nothing he could offer the man, no comfort he could give over such a loss. Not as the son of a farmer on his estate. And then as time passed, he knew he had made the right choice from them both, to sever that tie. They had both known their friendship had to end someday, and now Hannibal was the lord and that was the end of it.

And it truly was the end. For the next Will had heard, a few short months before going to war, was that part of the Lecter estate had been sold, land on which several of the tenants lived - his parents included.

They had been fortunate, another estate had been looking for a pig man and Mr Graham had been farming pigs for so many years that they'd have been fools not to take him. The job came with a cottage and a salary, so in the end it had worked well. And it would probably suit them better as they aged, less work than a whole farm.

That had been good fortune that might as well have been ruin, even if it left Will with no livelihood to return to. Hannibal wouldn't have known that the outcome would have been fortuitous. In fact, as far as Will knew from the letters, his lordship hadn't even offered assistance to those he was evicting, in finding new positions.

And now, the man who had haunted him since boyhood was there, waiting for him. As he had always waited for Will. As he had always overshadowed his life since the moment he had decided that Will must be his friend.

Their eyes met and locked as the car slowed to a stop.

The porter quickly moved to open the backdoor, allowing Hannibal to slip in, behind where Will sat in the front.

Will turned to salute which Hannibal acknowledged with a nod and a smile.

"Good to see you again, private." Hannibal's voice rumbled through him and sent a shiver down his spine. Will returned the curt nod and faced forward as the driver put the car into gear and continued on his way.

No further words were spoken by any of them until they reached GHQ and the driver bid them good day as they exited the car and another porter took Hannibal's case. Will carried his own bag, already kitted out for the front, and they stood in silence for a moment.

The car had pulled away and the porter had started back in, leaving them alone together for the first time in years.

So many years and in such a different life that it was hard to know what to say, if either of them could say anything at all.

Will felt struck dumb. He had known for a day what his new orders were, and was still no closer to finding any words. Or at least any that he could speak aloud.

But in the end he didn't need to say anything for Hannibal broke the silence, the words distant. Will knew Hannibal well enough, he was sure, to know that the words masked the

many emotions under the surface.

“I am glad to see you still alive. This has been a frightful year.”

Will nodded.

“Indeed it has,” were the only words Will could muster before he followed the porter inside.

*

At GHQ they were able to remain as separate as was possible, Will saw to that. But once they were moved out to the trenches there was no avoiding the close confinement they found themselves in.

Will wasn’t surprised to find that, despite being an officer, Hannibal was liked well enough by his men and they were glad to see him returned. The sergeant seemed a good man, and very much one of the platoon, a bridge between Hannibal and the men if it were needed.

When there was no more avoiding it, Will stood and watched as Hannibal shrugged off his coat in the officer’s quarters. He knew he should help him, that most soldier-servants would, but something held him back and those thoughts immediately became words.

“I’m not a servant. Not your valet,” Will preempted anything Hannibal might have said.

And to his words Hannibal chuckled and hung his own coat.

“Yes, I recall you told me more than once when we were children. You’re not my servant, Will. You're a soldier, and when this damn awful war is over, you will go back to being a farmer.”

At those words, Will stiffened.

He had never known Hannibal to be unfeeling, but grief could do strange things to people, and tragedy had taken his family from him, so perhaps it had impaired his judgement. All the same, Will’s anger boiled.

“What is it,” Hannibal asked softly.

Will was sure he was good at hiding his feelings, but he never could from Hannibal no matter how he might try.

“I’ve upset you.” Hannibal guessed. “I didn’t request you for my soldier-servant, I must tell you. You were assigned to me and in all honesty, I really had no idea whether you were alive or dead. Or whether you had joined up at all. For all I knew you were back on your farm and--”

“On my farm?!” Will interrupted, barking the words even as he tried not to shout. “What farm? When did you become so cruel?”

Hannibal frowned and blinked, taken aback and now completely silent as though waiting for more explanation for Will's outburst. Not that he intended to give one.

Hannibal's face paled and he looked pained.

"Will, has something happened to your parents?"

"You know it has," Will bit back.

"I know nothing. My god Will, I'm sorry. What has happened? What tragedy--"

"You, Hannibal. You're what happened. Selling off the estate, making them homeless and jobless in one fell swoop. I did not have a lot of regard for your father, he was a tough man. But he was fair, and I cannot believe he would ever have acted so cruelly."

"I don't understand," Hannibal protested, raising his hands in placation.

Will stopped himself from replying immediately, knowing that he might regret what he would say next. So instead he stilled and it all seemed strangely quiet, only the faint sounds of gunfire, a ratta-tat-tat from a far off trench.

Calmly, all business, Hannibal continued.

"Please, Will. I need to understand what has happened. I have no control over my estate, it has been left in the hands of my uncle until I reached twenty-one. And now I am here, my hands are tied."

When Will did not immediately reply, digesting this information, Hannibal let out a humourless chuckle.

"I can fight and die for my country, but I cannot control the land of my family."

Will shook himself. He had hated Hannibal over what had happened to his parents, a hatred that sat so strangely given the closeness they had previously shared. Given that one day on the banks of the stream.

And now it seems that hatred was misplaced?

"Your uncle?"

Hannibal nodded, "my father's will stipulated that my uncle Robert manage the estate. He wanted me to have time to mature, finish university and become a man in my own right. And in truth, he probably wrote that will years ago, possibly whilst I was a child, and likely never thinking that it would ever need to be enacted. Especially, had he known…"

"Known?" Will asked.

He wasn't sure which of them had moved but they were now standing close, less than an arm's length from each other.

“If he had known the sort of man Robert had become. I knew that he was mismanaging the estate, but it was beyond my control. I don’t understand how he has sold some of the land. That shouldn’t have been possible. I must write to my lawyer and--”

Will reached out and placed his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder, calming him.

“Yes, do that. My parents are fine, they have found a new situation. Others might not have been so lucky. But Hannibal, once you have written the letter don’t fret about it any longer. Leave it for others to deal with, make the lawyer earn his money. Your attention is required here.”

Hannibal’s face broke into a soft smile and they gazed at each other for a long moment before Will pulled back and busied himself, as much a way to avoid reacting the relief he now felt as anything else.

He could survive these trenches, this war, as long as he could save Hannibal too. The weight of his family’s misfortune lifted, all those emotions came flooding back. All those ones he had tried to deny for so long, and knew he could never act on. Or at least not as a lord and a farmer. But they were soldiers now, though their ranks might not be equal, their cause was the same and their lot as well. The danger they faced, they faced together and despite that danger, Will’s heart sang.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Forced back together, can Will and Hannibal ignore what is between them?

France. April, 1916

Hannibal found that Will was good at preempting his needs. There was always a fresh pot of ink, always sheets of paper every time Hannibal sat to write to command. There was always a pot of tea or coffee ready before Hannibal even knew he wanted one. And this, maddeningly, meant there was very little they needed to say to each other.

Especially as he was sure Will knew, that Hannibal would ask no more of him than he was already doing. Whilst he had been spoilt by Price, he would not expect Will to be a valet.

As when they were children, and perhaps from knowing each other so well back then, they worked seamlessly as a team. So much so that Hannibal was convinced that Krendler disliked Will as a result. They certainly rubbed each other the wrong way, but both were professional.

In fact, not a lot of the men liked Will at all. But that was perhaps because he never acted like a private. If anything he acted a higher rank than them all, as always Will was a free man unable to be tamed. He no more wanted to wear the yoke placed on him by a command chain than by a great house. Men like Will Graham, as much as they would do their part, would never be the ideal soldier for they would always trust their own counsel over the orders of any superior.

It should have made their professional relationship untenable, and perhaps had Will been placed with another than it would have done. But, as always, there was little Will could ever say or do that would sway Hannibal's good opinion of him. And for all his roughness, Will was still the smartest man he had ever known, and therefore his counsel was generally worth more than most of the officers Hannibal knew.

If Will had been born to a noble family and given a rank off the bat, then Hannibal would feel safe that the war effort was in such clever hands. If Will was more inclined to take orders and be less argumentative, then he may well rise through the ranks, though Hannibal was sure that would never happen. Given the chance Will could be offered a commission, become a 'temporary gentleman', but Hannibal knew Will would just as soon scoff at the idea.

And secretly Hannibal was thankful, for he preferred to have Will here with him.

The last few months had been a blessing.

The war went as it ever had, and as 1915 rolled into 1916 there were new orders in the pipeline, new offences. To Hannibal the only thing better than facing these times with Will would be knowing Will was instead home and safe in England and away from all of this.

But he couldn't let such thoughts consume him, he couldn't let his unending and arguably inconvenient affection for Will elevate him higher than any of the others under Hannibal's command.

Hannibal tried not to think of it as he sat writing his latest report to GHQ. He ignored the movement of the flap and Will coming into the dugout that served as officer's quarters, until a cool hand was unexpectedly placed on his forehead.

Hannibal tried to stifle the sharp breath he drew in at this, the first, and unexpected touch they had shared beyond a handshake since they had kissed almost five years earlier. A lifetime ago.

"You seem better," Will commented before dragging a blanket from the bunk and wrapping around Hannibal's shoulders. "But you should rest."

"I told you, it was just a cold. Not influenza, and it has passed quickly thanks to the hot toddies you like to ply me with. So no need for concern."

"I will be concerned when influenza spreads through these trenches and I am court martialed for not having reported it to GHQ." Will grumbled.

Hannibal chuckled and set down his pen, the ink was too cold to write with anyway as the evening drew in on the unseasonably cold day.

"I don't think they can court martial you for that, Will." Hannibal replied, turning his chair to watch as Will sorted blankets to ensure the thickest were on the bunk.

"I think they'd find any excuse to court martial me if they could." Will replied, tone serious though he did smile a little.

"Perhaps you're right," Hannibal grinned, "I will speak up for you of course. Tell them you're not nearly the trouble you like to think you are."

Will rolled his eyes and then stepped over so that he was standing in front of Hannibal. He fished something out of his top pocket, a cigarette and lighter.

"Here, I bartered this with one of the privates. It'll warm you."

"I don't smoke." Hannibal protested weakly as Will pressed the cigarette to Hannibal's lips.

He took it and watched as Will lit the lighter, cupping his hand around the fragile flame. Hannibal stood, not wanting Will to strain himself, and then cupped his hands around Will's as he drew the flame to the tip of the cigarette.

It was such a natural thing to do and perhaps with anyone else it would have been a fleeting and meaningless gesture. But as he felt Will's cool hands in his own, Hannibal found he

couldn’t let them go.

They gazed at each other and the flame flickered between them, burning the end of the cigarette but not catching properly as Hannibal didn’t inhale. He wasn’t sure he remembered how to, he wasn’t sure he could breathe again unless he was breathing the same air as Will.

It felt as though both were too afraid to move, too afraid of startling the other. After all these months living around each other, this first real offer of friendship from Will seemed to have erased all the years and distance between the riverbank and the trenches. This moment.

The flame died and Hannibal let the cigarette fall from his lips as they both moved forward. Tentative at first, and then hungry as their mouths met. Will dropped the lighter and their hands went from cupping the flame to each other’s faces as they kissed desperately.

So many years of need and want, pent up and unable to be released until this moment.

They broke from the kiss, still holding each other’s faces in their hands as they rested their foreheads together and panted.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed out the name that sat within his heart.

When Will’s hands dropped and he tried to suddenly pull away, Hannibal stopped him, sliding his fingers into his hair and holding him tight.

“No, Will. Not again, don’t run from me again.” Hannibal growled quietly, part plea, part order.

Will let out a heavy breath and stilled. Hannibal could feel him shaking and wasn’t sure whether it was nerves or rage.

“You ran before because of our positions, didn’t you?” Hannibal asked gently, even as he gripped Will’s hair all the tighter. He couldn’t let him go, not again.

Will nodded, his eyes closed when he replied a little above a whisper. “I was terrified of my feelings for you. I ached for you, even so young I knew how much I needed you. But I’m just a farmer. We couldn’t even be friends, much less…”

Will trailed off and Hannibal nodded.

“You’re not a farmer now, Will. We are neither of us who we used to be. And who knows what the world will hold for us when this all ends. What shapes it will have twisted itself into and been remade from the fires of all of this hate.”

Will opened his eyes, and Hannibal ached at the wetness he saw there.

“We’re both soldiers now,” Will mumbled.

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, something between a chuckle and a sob breaking loose from his chest.

They were silent for a moment before they both leaned in once more and pressed their lips together so softly that it made Hannibal ache all the more.

The kiss continued, deepening only a little as they melted against each other. It felt like, if no clothes separated them, they would become one flesh. Conjoined and inseparable, forever.

It was the sound of heavy boots passing the dugout flap that ended the moment as they both jumped apart just in case someone entered. The boots continued on and they were left undisturbed, leaving them both to exhale.

“And yet, there is nothing we can do.” Will’s words were full of dark humour and cold irony.

Hannibal knew, if they were to be safe and unbothered, then Will was right. But for years he had wanted no one but Will. Since he was old enough to understand what attraction was and where the limits of friendship ended and a different affection bloomed, he had only thought of Will.

“Will,” he breathed his name again and pressed forward. Will didn’t pull away, letting Hannibal’s lips come so close to his own that they shared one breath. Their bodies pressed together once more, though this time Hannibal turned slightly from where he stood. Enough that he knew Will would feel his erection and that he could feel Will’s against his own thigh. No mistaking or denying what this was.

“I need to touch you,” Hannibal panted against Will’s mouth. “Will you let me? Will you be quiet enough to let me?”

He felt Will shudder but he didn’t agree or push Hannibal away.

“Is this all we can be?” Will asked, an anger there, though not directed at Hannibal.

“Perhaps. Maybe there could be a place for us someday, but can we wait for it? When we don’t know what could become of us tomorrow?” Hannibal felt desperate though he kept his words calm. The memory of the shell explosion, of Price and himself being injured, thrust itself into his mind and it took everything in him not to take Will into his arms.

“Can I touch you, Will?” Hannibal asked again.

Will nodded and closed his eyes.

France. June, 1916

“H-Hannibal…” Will gasped his lover's name as he stroked him in a perfected manner. The way he had learned would get Will off the quickest.

It had been two months since the first time it had happened. When Hannibal had fumbled and quickly stroked Will off as they were too caught up in the passion to consider that they might get caught. It was for the best that Will came within just a few strokes.

For years Will hadn’t let himself think of a man whilst he sought release, least of all Hannibal. Instead it was perfunctory and only when necessary. So to him it wasn’t a surprise

that the touch of Hannibal's hand for the very first time was enough to bring him off in moments.

He lasted longer now, and had become something of an expert with Hannibal's cock too. He loved the velvety feel of it in his hand as he watched Hannibal's face melt into pleasure.

Once or twice they had managed a longer moment where they were able to kiss as passionately as that first time as they both worked each other together.

They had found, as now, that there was a quiet time a little after the men took their lunch. Awake as much as they were in the night and with boredom crushing during the day, a full belly sent most of them napping. It was time enough that Hannibal and Will could retire to the officer's dugout under the guise of doing an officer's work.

And now Hannibal worked him. His hand firm but gentle down the front of Will's trousers. His fingers had been slightly chill when he had slid them under Will's underwear and taken him in hand, but had warmed as quickly as Will had hardened.

"Kiss me," Will demanded, breathlessly. A pleasure they often denied themselves for how easy it was to get lost in those kisses. How much greater a risk it was for them.

"Not today," Hannibal muttered just above Will's mouth, sharing air once more.

Will held back a whine, remaining as silent as he always must.

"Tomorrow we go to GHQ, there are to be new orders. I shall kiss you then."

Will shuddered, remembering the one and only time they had been to GHQ since he had come to the trenches. It had been a month earlier, a routine trip for Hannibal. One that had allowed them, in the dead of night, to share a bed. They had not been brave enough to do much more than they already had in the trenches. At least in the bed they could be fully naked together and truly explore each other. In a bed it had felt different. It felt something like a real life.

They'd had to be discrete of course. They'd had to be quiet. Will had waited until nearly 3am before going to Hannibal's room and had left again before 6am and thankfully met no servant, despite having already concocted a story should he chance upon one. One that would hide the truth of those glorious hours together.

Will could wait for his kisses in that case, but he could wait no more for his release as he shook and spilled over Hannibal's hand at the thought of another night together like that.

"My darling," Hannibal sighed against his cheek as he continued to stroke Will until the last drop was done. "Tomorrow."

The word was a promise.

"Tomorrow," Will agreed as he tried to catch his breath.

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Will was on edge the whole way to the back line and then onto GHQ. They took another officer with them, a recently arrived stern looking temporary gentleman whose presence made Will wary. Not least the way he eyed them and the way his eyes narrowed when they were introduced. He knew Hannibal's name that much was clear, but Will didn't know if the distaste there was simply a reaction to Hannibal being a lord, or if there was more to it.

He thought no more of it once they got to GHQ. Will was left to his own devices as Hannibal attended meetings and a dinner with officers and superiors.

The day was long and Will was surprised not to see Hannibal until he went, in his guise as valet, to dress Hannibal for bed.

When he entered the small suite, it was immediately clear that Hannibal was deeply unhappy. He sat on the chaise next to the blacked out window, lost in thoughts that were clearly troubling.

Will closed the door soundly behind him, immediately dropping his pretence as a soldier-servant and went to Hannibal’s side. He sat down and drew Hannibal’s hands into his.

"What is it?" Will asked, gently.

Hannibal continued to stare off for a moment before finally seeming to realise that Will was there.

"A big push. We're going over the top."

Will frowned. It was bound to happen sooner or later, but why now when the boche were, if anything, in a stronger position than ever.

"When?"

Hannibal looked at him then, despair there.

"Within a fortnight. First they will bombard the German line. For days. They plan to decimate their forces, it will just be for us to go over and sweep up any remnants."

Will nodded. "It seems a sound plan, then. A break to this stalemate."

Hannibal's mouth turned ever more downward.

"I wish I could believe it. I have a terrible feeling about the whole thing. When they decided this offensive last year we had more divisions, but then Verdun happened and now..." He stopped and shook his head. "It's the responsibility you see. I suppose on some level it’s something my birth should have prepared me for. I’ve always understood my responsibilities as a landowner, that taking over from my father to run the estate when the time came would leave me responsible for all those on that land. As much good as I’ve done in that regard.”

Will squeezed his hand and shook his head, “You are not responsible for your uncle’s mismanagement. Once you’re home and in charge things will be different, I know it.”

“I hope so. I hope I can make up for his errors and for my father’s misjudgement of him.” Hannibal sighed. “But my meaning is this, that responsibility, the thought of which can be sometimes crushing, is nothing to this. I am an officer through no particular skill or talent on my part but I am now to order men to do something that might cost them their lives.”

“But that’s war,” Will protested. “You’ve been doing that since you arrived here.”

Hannibal shook his head, “not on this scale. Since I’ve been here we’ve not had to send tens of thousands of men across no man’s land. What if we have underestimated the German forces, what if--”

“Stop,” Will pressed a finger to Hannibal’s lips. “What can we do? Nothing, this is war and these are our orders. And I wish I could carry some of this weight for you.”

Will was startled when Hannibal moved quickly and took his hand, holding it tight. “Stay, don’t go and come back, just stay with me now. I need you.”

Will swallowed. He knew he shouldn't; this was a terrible idea that could get them both court martialed and imprisoned as sodomites if they were caught.

He should go, but Hannibal looked so vulnerable and clung to him so hard that Will found he couldn’t leave. And when that became obvious, Hannibal spoke again.

“Hold me. Hold me tonight so that I can face tomorrow.

Before Will could pull Hannibal into his arms, Hannibal stood and pulled Will to his feet. And Will understood and followed to the bed.

He stood there as Hannibal let go of his hand and went to the door. He turned the lock and came back, his hands immediately going to Will’s shirt.

Will shivered as Hannibal’s hands danced over him, divesting him of every stitch of clothing. When Will stood there naked, Hannibal gave him a gentle push and he went down onto the bed.

“I procured some vaseline jelly,” Hannibal’s words were a little over a whisper, as though he was worried someone might be listening at the door.

“Is that what you want?” Will asked, trembling slightly. He couldn’t deny that he had imagined them being together in such a way since their tryst had started. And it seemed now was the time and place.

After Hannibal’s words, it also felt like there was a finality to it all. It was in the air, unspoken but known so absolutely - this might be their only chance.

“Very much so,” Hannibal replied, letting his clothes drop to the floor.

“You are my superior, so does it follow that you are the penetrator?” Will swallowed tightly. He hadn’t put much thought to the who and the how. He had hoped they’d have time to

explore many ways to be together at some point, but now he realised what an unrealistic idea that had been.

“I suppose it is what might be expected in such situations as these? Like an erastes and his eromenos. But we are as youthful as each other, and I have to admit to a long held desire. A fantasy, I suppose you’d call it, of lying under you as you take me and make me yours.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The war brought them together but now it will pull them apart.

NB: This chapter has some descriptions of war and specifically the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

"Lecter, a word." The colonel's voice came from the now open doorway, as though he had been waiting for Lecter to pass by his office.

Hannibal froze. He knew what was coming next.

They had been quiet, despite how he had wanted to cry out Will's name. He could still feel Will inside him, and the thought was something that would keep him going until the next time they could be intimate once more.

But he knew that they should have been more discreet. Any number of people might have noticed that Will hadn't left Hannibal's room after dressing him for bed. He had just needed him so much, in every way a human could need another.

As Hannibal turned to look at the colonel's stern expression, the evening flashed through his mind. Every moment was worth what was coming next.

~

Hannibal watched Will's face as he moved between Hannibal's legs. He watched as Will bit at his lower lip and Hannibal wanted to bite it too.

It was clear that neither of them had done this before, when they fumbled awkwardly with the vaseline jelly before first Hannibal's, and then Will's fingers, found their way inside Hannibal's prone body. It was a strange sensation but not wholly unpleasant. And that strangeness was forgotten when Will's fingers brushed over something inside that had him shuddering and begging for more.

Will was sweating. He looked frantic and Hannibal could feel how hard his lover was against his thigh. The more his fingers worked inside, the more desperate Hannibal became to feel that hard length instead.

He had thought of this often, it had been in his dreams. Will admitting his feelings, admitting that there was indeed love between them, the world be damned. And Will lying over him and joining them both together.

The memories of those thoughts and dreams were enough to make Hannibal leak, his wet eagerness dribbling against his belly as Will moved his fingers again and again until Hannibal could barely stand it. More of this treatment, more of this caressing of that inner pleasure, and Hannibal would spill between them.

He wanted that. Oh, how he wanted it. But more so he wanted to spend when WIll was inside him, making tangible their undeniable love.

"Hannibal," Will muttered, his voice husky as he withdrew his fingers and moved to rest their foreheads together.

Hannibal could only whimper, feeling loose but also empty. Needing Will inside him.

"Will, please…" Hannibal asked.

They met each other's eyes as Will shifted. Hannibal didn't look down but from the movements and the scent, he knew that Will was coating himself in the vaseline. The thought made Hannibal shudder and he had to force himself to keep his eyes open. To keep watching his beautiful friend.

It seemed they had both stopped breathing when Will notched himself against Hannibal.

Another strange sensation as Will began to push into him, but one that Hannibal didn't want to end. There was a fullness to it, a thickness that was difficult to describe, though the sensation was welcome and wonderful.

Their eyes remained locked as Will slowly moved forward, hovering over him as Hannibal spread his legs and canted his hips to try and accommodate Will all the more. Instinct moving him in ways he had never realised could feel this innate.

It was as Will slid all the way inside him, that he realised they were trembling as much as each other.

Will stilled, pleasure writ large on his features and Hannibal knew without words that he needed to take a moment otherwise there would be a premature end to all of this.

Will's eyes closed as he let out a long, shaky breath. When he opened them again they were immediately locked with Hannibal's.

"I love you," Will said, the words leaving him in a rush.

"Will," Hannibal replied, a shiver all over his skin as Will began to rock inside him. "I love you," he gasped in return.

Will lowered his head, pressing his lips to Hannibal's neck as they silently moved together.

Each thrust was slow but firm. A slow but firm build to the mutual climax they were chasing.

Hannibal was harder than he could ever recall being before. Every brush of Will's flesh against his own brought him closer to the edge. He'd had no idea it would feel like this, that

it would make him feel so enveloped and complete.

When Will's mouth found his, Hannibal knew he wouldn't last much longer.

Their kisses were the hungry explorations that had been denied before. Frantic and clawing in a way their bodies weren't, each thrust remaining measured until Hannibal found himself suddenly cresting. The intensity of the kiss, the rough friction of Will's belly against his hardness, and the sensation of being filled with his lover, was suddenly more than he could bear.

Clenching his jaw in an attempt not to cry out, Hannibal spilled over his belly. His eyes rolled as his muscles contracted in response, gripping around Will's length so that he could feel every hard inch of him. Could feel the burn of every thrust within him.

Will bit back his own grunts as it clearly became harder to move, sliding into the increasing tightness. Each movement became more erratic until he stifled a growl against Hannibal's shoulder and released inside him.

They both shook with the sensation, both physical and emotional. Their consummation and declaration. No matter what came next for the both, they would be forever conjoined.

~

Hannibal stood before the colonel's desk, each moment was torture as he waited for the man to resume his seat and speak. But all the while Hannibal stood rigid despite standing easy.

"Take a seat," the colonel said, a huff to his words. The invitation was unexpected, he could as easily be told he was being court martialed whilst standing. The military escort to wherever they would then take him would need him on his feet.

"We've had some rather serious information brought to us. Some rumours amongst the men." When the colonel paused as though considering his next words, Hannibal couldn't help but ask.

"My platoon?"

"Not that I'm aware." The colonel rumbled the words with a frown. "I had Krendler asked for an opinion on you and your command of the men. Nothing official, just his impression. He spoke very highly of you and said your platoon thinks well of you and you command them superbly. That was all the corporal could get from him without asking anything more… incriminating, at this time."

The word made Hannibal's jaw clench, but he gave no visible reaction, remaining stoic.

"I understand you're not married." It was a rhetorical question and the colonel continued without missing a beat. "I know that it can get lonely on the front, but there are limits. This isn't the first time we've had concerns like this arise. And usually we'd be looking at an investigation, suspension. The consequences…"

The colonel let the words hang in the air for a long moment before clearing his throat.

“The thing is, as you know, everything is a little tight around here at the moment. We don’t have time for this right now, we can’t afford it. And quite frankly we can’t afford to lose a good officer either.”

His tone remained flat and harsh.

“This,” the colonel waved a hand as though trying to conjure the best word, “*gossip*. It is all speculation and with no evidence I find myself having to weigh up the cost to your platoon of an investigation at this time when we need every man on the frontline. I find myself having to find an appropriate solution without spending any more time on this unpleasant business.”

“I understand, sir.” Hannibal responded when the silence drew out.

The colonel shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his distaste clear.

“You will go back to the front, where you are needed. We will discuss this further once we’re over the German line, and see whether or not an investigation is warranted.” His tone was ever harsher and it was clear this was necessity not leniency, he would happily see Hannibal court martialed on the suspicion alone.

“In the meantime, this situation is untenable, so Graham will be reassigned. When you go back to front he will remain here and we’ll find somewhere else to ship him off to. We will send you a new man in due course, but as you can appreciate it isn’t a priority, so I suggest you ask one of the privates to offer you any appropriate assistance that you need.”

“Yes, sir.”

The colonel rose to his feet and Hannibal quickly did the same.

“Dismissed.”

*

“Private Graham,” Will looked up from where he sat in the mess, to see another private addressing him with a note in his hand. He handed it to Will with a nod and then left.

Will looked down at the note in his hand, the envelope with its official stamp, and he was sure he knew what this was.

Hannibal had been hurriedly sent back to the front line, but Will had been detained for want of a better word. They hadn’t even been able to say anything to each other beyond public pleasantries, but the look in Hannibal’s eyes had been enough for him to understand what had happened. The fact that they were only to be separated and not arrested was astounding and not something either of them should take for granted.

He only wondered how much distance would be between them. If they both remained in France they still might not see each other, not unless they both had the good luck of being rotated to the backline at the same time. But even then? The risk was so great, they’d only be able to steal a glance at each other and satisfy themselves with that.

That would be enough, for now. If he remained in France.

But then he opened the envelope and his heart sank. There it was, in black and white, the ink fresh and only just dry when it was shoved into the envelope and brought to him.

New orders. He wasn't returning to the Western Front. He was being sent East.

France. July 1st 1916

Hannibal drew his pistol, feeling the weight of it in his hand.

It seemed so lacking in comparison to the rifles his platoon wielded, not that it would matter one way or the other. Either the German forces had been decimated and there would be no resistance, or the feeling of increasing dread in his gut would be proven and having any gun might not matter at all. He wondered if any of the other men in this first wave over the top felt the same.

"Fix!" The sergeant shouted, his voice not wavering as Hannibal was sure his own would. In unison the men drew their bayonets ready.

Hannibal was no coward, but he had never been able to shake the sense of dread that had only grown since he and Will had been parted. Part of him was happy that Will was away from the front, but mostly he was fearful at not knowing where Will was. There was no way he could find out, not now, not without garnering unwanted attention. He just hoped it wasn't here, he hoped Will wasn't going over somewhere along the line.

"Bayonets!" Krendler roared, the sound of each bayonet being affixed to the rifles echoed around the trench.

Hannibal studied the man for a moment. A good sergeant and a reliable man.

When Hannibal had returned without Will, Krendler had given his report on the happenings whilst Hannibal had been at GHQ as usual. But there had been some words in there, about how the men were loyal to him. Enough to be understood.

Apparently he and Will had not been as discreet as they had thought.

Hannibal put the whistle to his lips and waited for the order.

And then it came and Hannibal blew, the shrill hurting his ears. Because he had no other choice. None of them did.

Everything up to this moment seemed suddenly so inconsequential. Hannibal's mind pulled him back to that first kiss on the river bank in those innocent days. How huge that had seemed, how big and fearful the world had been.

It was nothing to this.

Hannibal watched the men move up, and then it was his time. He stepped onto the ladder and pulled himself up the rungs one handed, pistol raised. The trill of whistles stopped and the

sound of gunfire began.

Firing upon the German line? In triumph or were there enemies still there? The few that the bombs did not take care of?

It was only as he got to the top, that the reality was clear. That his dread had been so terribly deserved.

“Keep moving!” Krendler screamed at the men, with each new one out of the trench hesitating upon seeing what they could never unsee.

The men marched at a clip towards the German line, each dropping like stones. The screams were the only thing that could be heard over the gunfire.

Hannibal stepped fully onto the top, moving aside for the next man on the ladder and then realising that no one was there.

“Keep-” Krendler’s words were cut off and Hannibal heard a thud of a man falling. But his eyes were still affixed on the man behind him.

No sooner had his head peeked over the top than a sniper bullet had run through his face. The man no longer had a nose, and the exit wound soaked the soldiers behind on whom his body had then fallen, blocking their own way out.

“Move him!” Hannibal commanded, his voice full of an anger that wasn’t meant for his men. “Keep coming.”

It took Hannibal a moment to realise he had levelled his pistol at his own men and they eyed him warily as they rolled the body out of the way and took once more to the rungs.

It was what he had been ordered, what they all had. Cowardice was punishable by death. Every man was to go over.

Something terrible lodged in Hannibal’s chest and he lowered his pistol, turning from the men he could not shoot regardless of his orders.

What had they all become?

He was no coward, but as he looked over the dead and dying before him, knowing that the men behind him were about to run to the same fate, Hannibal wanted no part of it.

He wanted to tell them to retreat, but that order had been prohibited. No retreat was allowed.

So overconfident they had been.

The air was filled with cries, shots, the whistling of bullets as they raced through the air and the sickening thud when they found a target.

Thud!

Hannibal didn’t realise the impact at first. Nor the pain. He only knew that he was falling.

It seemed so slow a descent, as though flying through the air, but he did not land. He kept falling, and then he felt the crunch as he finally hit the floor. He looked up and could see the men above him, still scrambling up the rungs as he lay on his back in the bottom of the trench.

He looked up at the sky, studying the strange calmness above them, as though everything that happened under that wide expanse was so pointless and insignificant.

His eyelids became heavy and he was unable to keep them open. The last thing Hannibal saw, and then felt, was another soldier falling back into the trench and landing on top of him.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The war is over but the wounds cut deep.

NB: This chapter is a bit angsty as post-war Hannibal tries to live with everything the war dealt him. And, as you can imagine, both Hannibal and Will are suffering some PTSD from the war.

Oxford. May, 1919

The tea spilled into the saucer before the teacup finally gave way to gravity and tumbled to the floor. An inch to the right and it would have hit the ornate rug, but instead it hit the hardwood floor and smashed.

“Damn and blast,” Hannibal fell back into the chair he had been trying to rise from and balled his good hand into a fist, slamming it down on the chair arm on the opposite side to the small side table.

Hannibal drew in a breath and calmed himself. He had learned long ago to deal with his frustrations, but silly little accidents like this served to remind him that he would never be whole again.

And with that reminder always came the dull ache, the memories and realisation that he would never be whole in ways other than the physical.

“Sir?” Mr Sugden ambled into the room as fast as he was able, clearly having heard the racket. His face full of concern and then pity as he spotted the cup on the floor.

He was so much older now, and he had seemed ancient when he had been the butler for his parents at their estate. Hannibal knew that the expectation had been to let all the staff go when he had closed up the big house and moved to a smaller house in Oxford, the only other place familiar to him. But he couldn’t, not after all they had been put through with his uncle, not the older ones who had no other work to go to but were not ready to retire. It was the least he could do with the little he had left.

“I’ll have Thomas bring in a broom. Can I get you something, sir?”

Hannibal had looked away when he’d seen the pity in the butler’s eyes, and he did not look back as he shook his head.

“Thank you, I don’t feel like tea anymore.” Hannibal realised the coldness of his tone and so offered on a friendlier note, “it was my fault. You must apologise to Mrs Brown for me, I’ve

created an uneven number in the china."

"No harm done," Sugden replied softly and that drew a smile from Hannibal. Memories of the butler being just as soft on him when he was a curious child treading muddy footprints into the great foyer.

"I should have sat in the other chair," Hannibal said, more to himself than the butler. "I wanted to be seated nearer the window and so the side table was… I did not consider my arm when I went to rise and look at the birds."

"Then it is my fault entirely, sir." Sugden protested, a hint of humour in his tone. He was wearing a slight smile when Hannibal finally turned to meet his eyes. "A good servant anticipates everything his master might need. I did not anticipate this, and so the fault is mine. Tomorrow Thomas and I will rearrange the furniture a little. Perhaps we will bring in one of the side tables from the drawing room if more are needed."

Hannibal smiled, the lump in his throat stealing his voice. And so he simply nodded and looked back to the window.

It was strange what this century had made of them all. Loyal staff had become somewhat familial, bird song felt like a treasure that might be suffocated by the sound of artillery fire, a teacup smashing could open wounds that would never fully heal.

Hannibal felt suddenly tired but wouldn't entertain the thought of going to his room so early. It felt defeatist and it would only lead to a depression.

Instead he sat watching the birds until Thomas came in with the broom and pan and at that he stood and moved from the small library into the sitting room. This time though he was more aware of himself and used his good arm to help tuck the bad into his pocket so that it wouldn't fly free as he moved.

The damage was permanent but variable. He would never have full feeling in the arm again and the hand was almost useless. And on days like today the nerves seemed to give up completely and leave him with a dead weight from dawn to nightfall. Sometimes he wished they had simply amputated it, as they had done for so many others in the field hospitals.

But the bullet struck deep into his shoulder, shattering bone and severing all manner of connective tissues. The resulting issues with his arm were rooted in his shoulder and so an amputation wasn't desirable to the doctors. Not when they were battling to save as much as they could of limbs blown apart. He was lucky, he'd been told.

And whilst Hannibal wished he could believe that, it was very difficult when he was in pain.

Hannibal shook the thoughts away as he settled in one of the plump couches next to the unlit fireplace.

He must have nodded off because he realised he was awakening to the bustle of the doors being opened and Sugden letting someone into the house. With no announcement or

ceremony afforded to a visitor - something the butler prided himself in - it could only be one person. The woman who shared this home with him.

“Hannibal-kun,” Lady Murasaki breezed into the room as though floating. Always so graceful, she came to a stop at the couch and reached down a hand, placing it on his cheek.

Hannibal closed his eyes and sighed at the touch.

“I didn’t think you would be back for a few days,” Hannibal’s voice was husky with sleep.

“Chiyoh and I caught an earlier train. There was nothing more for us to do on the estate, not for now. Not until you decide.”

Hannibal nodded and her hand dropped away. She lowered herself to the couch opposite him just as Sugden entered with a tea tray.

Hannibal drifted as the tea was set down and poured, pleasantries exchanged as Murasaki volunteered news of the town to Sugden, who listened gratefully.

She had always seemed so severe when he imagined her, when he was younger. And now their relationship was a strange one. Related by marriage, it still made her his only living family now, but they were friends more than anything.

When Hannibal had returned from the front to the great house, it had been a blow. Some of the damage done by his uncle could never be undone. And whilst Hannibal had been lying in a hospital bed in France, his uncle had succumbed to the effects of many years of alcohol and had been found dead in his bed one morning by his valet.

Hannibal had returned to England for convalescence but was useless for active duty. And so he had ended up back on his family estate, only having to leave for the occasional meeting or obligatory duty. He had thought in those days he would have gone mad if he hadn’t had the problems of the estate to entertain him.

And with those he would have gone mad without Murasaki to assist, to help him unravel all that his uncle had done with neither of them being in a position to stop him.

They had become close, loss pulling them together at first, but then more than that. A sort of kinship that went beyond her marriage to his uncle. And one day he had realised the shape of that kinship when he had seen a subtle movement of Murasaki’s hand lightly over the back of Chiyoh’s as the lady’s maid handed her a stole.

Having allowed what Hannibal considered must be the correct amount of time, he waited for his aunt to set her teacup back down and asked the question that had been ringing noisily in his mind since she had left with Chiyoh and Mrs Brown to see to the airing out of the great house.

“Did you find any news on the Graham’s?” Hannibal wanted to scream the words, he imagined himself hurtling over the low table between them and shaking her until she told him where Will was. As though she, or anyone, had that power.

She took in a slow breath and then placed her hands in her lap. That was enough to break Hannibal's heart and she clearly saw that in his expression. They had made so many enquiries around the area already, it was hard to believe they would ever turn up anything new.

"Not as yet," her words were apologetic. "So many of the farmers that knew them are no longer on the estate. In the town, Mrs Graham seems to have been well liked enough, and known to many. She would sell her jams to many."

Those words brought back visceral memories of his childhood, of a kitchen where he had always been welcome. He could almost smell the fruit being stewed on the stove and it made him want to sob at the loss of it.

"I made enquiries and the shopkeeper in the town recalled that the Graham's were friendly enough with a local pigman and that they might have stayed in touch. But she could not recall his name. I left her with instructions to write to me here if she should remember."

Hannibal nodded. He wanted to be hopeful, this was further than they had ever gotten before. But there was such a tumult of emotions inside of him over the whole thing.

He had enquired all the military places he was able to and had been unable to locate Will in any of the serving or injured soldiers on the Western Front. He knew the chances were, if he ever located Will's family, that they would confirm he was dead, or that they didn't know his fate either.

He could be one of those obliterated bodies in No-Man's-Land that didn't even leave enough to be buried where he fell like so many of their company.

Hannibal had been home almost two years, the war had ended six months ago and it felt as time rolled on it settled sourly in his gut. He'd prefer to have known of Will's death the moment it happened, so that he knew and wouldn't have to live with this small flicker of hope that made him die a little more inside with every resurfaced memory.

"Damn him," Hannibal growled, gritting his teeth.

Murasaki let out a sigh, knowing as always that he meant his uncle. If not for him then the estate would still be intact, the Graham's would never have moved. And even if Will was dead he would know by now. He would have been able to face his grief and not live in this horrific limbo.

Oxford. August, 1919

Hannibal's life was one of routine.

The war had truly ended now, he had been decommissioned. And without those few engagements, Hannibal had no purpose. Murasaki encouraged him almost daily to give up the Oxford house and find somewhere in London instead. At least in London there was life, people that he had known from school or through his family. Dinners, balls, the return to normality whilst everyone tried to ignore that so many of the men his age were now missing from those events.

He should do it for Murasaki. This was no life for her, with so few families to dine with and life so much smaller than it had been before the war. Perhaps he would consider it, but he should settle the estate first. He still needed to decide whether to sell it or try to return it to what glory he could. Most days he had no heart or stomach to consider either.

So instead, he simply existed in Oxford. A daily routine of being dressed by his valet, taking breakfast with his aunt, reading until lunch. Some afternoons he made himself take a walk but he found he hated the sound of motorcars. He had not much used one before the war, so his enduring memory was being ferried between GHQ and the front, of being taken from the front to the hospital in a motorised ambulance.

Even so, he needed the routine or he'd have nothing. What use was he in any other way?

"The paper, sir."

He hadn't noticed Sugden appear next to the breakfast table with the morning paper on a tray. He nodded his thanks and took it, not taking in the words that formed the headlines.

"And a letter for you, my lady." The butler lowered the tray to Murasaki who took a moment to wipe her mouth with a napkin and set it back down before taking the letter and thanking Sugden.

A minute passed with Hannibal still attempting to take in the headlines, when Murasaki spoke, in her usual composed way.

"Hannibal-kun, this letter is from the shopkeeper I spoke of. She had the fortune of seeing the pigman she half remembered. He did indeed stay in touch with the Grahams. They moved not far away, but then he lost touch with them when Mrs Graham died. He had been told that Mr Graham moved to London but that is all that is known."

Hannibal didn't look up from the newspaper. He continued staring at it blankly as Murasaki had delivered this news and now he was frozen to the spot.

A lead, yes. But also another dead end.

Hannibal thought of Mr Graham, a farmer with generations of the same behind him and he couldn't imagine for one moment such a man in London. He struggled to imagine him anywhere other than the farm his uncle had robbed him of.

"May I see the letter?" Hannibal asked.

From the corner of his eye he saw Murasaki slide it towards him, but he didn't take it. He would pick it up before he left the table and take it to his room to read in private.

He didn't need to look up at her to know that Murasaki's expression would be one of mixed hopefulness and pity.

London was a big place. How did one go about finding a single person amongst the throngs? As though reading his thoughts, Murasaki spoke casually.

“It is more information than you had before. Perhaps you should go to London, hire an enquiry agent and have them see what more they can uncover.”

Hannibal expelled a sound that was neither a hum nor a grunt, and silence fell between them once more.

Whether he wanted his hopes to be raised or not, Hannibal was already considering arrangements for a trip to London to see what could be made of all this.

London. September, 1919

Will woke with a start.

He wasn’t sure if it was the screaming that woke him, or the cracks and crashes outside his window.

His throat was raw and he knew the screaming had been his own. As he fully woke, he also knew that the sounds were lightning and thunder in the balmy summer storm above the city and not the cracks of artillery fire over the desert.

Will let out a plaintive moan and wiped his face with the back of his arm. It came away with sweat and tears, a familiar combination.

He had hoped that his nightmares were getting better. They were certainly less frequent, but when they hit they were vivid and nauseating. Strange twisted realities that made him feel like he was coming apart, cracking into a thousand pieces like fine china.

His nightmares gave him a reality where his mother had not died of influenza but had instead been with him on the Eastern Front. He saw her so clearly there in Baghdad. But it wasn’t her, just an animated corpse dried to a husk by the harsh heat. She had opened her mouth to speak but only flies poured out. He had followed their movements with his eyes as they swarmed over the buildings and eventually behind him.

When he turned, there stood Hannibal. As dead and dry as his mother.

Will felt a stab of pain and wailed at both the memory of the dream, and the knowledge that it would haunt him for at least the day ahead of him, if not longer. Much longer.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will Graham is making a new life for himself in London.

London. September, 1919

Will was lost in his thoughts as he dressed for work.

As predicted, he couldn't shake his dream. It lingered in his mind and set him firmly in the past as he tried to push his way through the present, and his usual morning routine.

He pulled on his black socks but in his hands he saw a worn pair that always had at least a few grains of sand within. He ran his fingers through his curly hair, smoothing it a little to one side, but in the mirror he saw the short back and sides that had given some relief in the Mesopotamian heat though the tips of his ears had burned.

When he was finally ready to leave for work, his satchel felt notably lighter than the pack he had carried on manoeuvres. In his suit instead of uniform he felt naked.

It was such a strange feeling. Will hadn't ever expected to have the relationship with the army that he had ended up with. After being sent East he knew that he could either continue being stubborn and petulant, or he could dig in, work hard. He didn't want to do as Hannibal had suggested and become a temporary gentleman, his pride wouldn't let him go that far. But he knew he was smart and skilled, and these were things he could use.

But in truth what happened once he got to the Eastern Front was a combination of luck and an occasional white lie.

It was pure fortune that the day he arrived coincided with the arrival of an officer with whom he would find a position.

Sir Reginald Bloom was an older gentleman, made older still by weak eyes even if his mind was sharp. Will had recognised the name immediately as a friend to the Lecters. Bloom's daughter Alana was his own age and he knew that she and Hannibal had been friends when functions had brought their families together.

This wasn't something that had come up until a week into his transfer. Will was yet to be sent to the front and was still acclimatising to the heat when he happened to walk past the Officer's Club as Bloom was leaving it.

At first, Will had thought he might have had too much to drink or been adversely affected by the heat, as he stumbled into the decorative urn in the foyer. Will had immediately righted the

man who had given his thanks.

Bloom's glasses were thick but the way he squinted betrayed how useless they were. Will made a reasonable excuse to save the man's pride and allow him to assist in his return to his quarters. On the way there Will had thought nothing of answering when the officer had asked where he grew up, recognising the accent.

"You must know of the Lecter Family," he had smiled, as though warmed by thoughts of home more than by the exhaustive weather.

Will saw no reason not to reply truthfully that he had grown up on their estate, a childhood friend of the young lord.

The lie had started there. A misunderstanding that Will saw no reason to correct. A belief that Will was something more to the family than just the son of a tenant farmer. When Bloom had assumed Will knew his daughter, Will agreed, knowing enough about her from Hannibal to fake it.

The lie, in itself, had ended there. But the tendrils that snaked out from that lie were far reaching.

It had been two days later when Will had been called to Bloom's office and told he had been promoted to corporal and reassigned. He would now act as the lord's private secretary. A trusted man with a vague connection to his family, who would assist with the tasks that Bloom's eyes made difficult. A man of great influence and money, there was no argument, no suggestion that such a great man and decorated officer from the Boer War shouldn't be there. And if he needed a secretary in order to fulfil his duties that was simply his prerogative.

Will looked at his reflection again, curly hair and smart if slightly cheap suit now. But a job he wouldn't have if not for the time spent with Bloom.

Will opened the door to his father's room a crack to see that he was still sleeping, before he quietly let himself out of the small apartment and into the street. He saved money where he could so that he could have a housekeeper come in for a few hours a day and look after his father now that his health was failing. Will wished he could have set him up somewhere in the countryside but the jobs were in London and so this had been the only option.

And Mrs Crawford and her husband lived in the building, so she gave him preferential rates. He liked the Crawfords a lot, they'd made him feel at home when he'd moved to London and had been incredibly supportive when he had started to need extra help with his dad.

"Mr Graham," Bev Katz greeted as he walked into the office, his mind still stuck on his dream and the thoughts it had been throwing up all morning.

But seeing Bev made him smile. She was as close a friend as he could own and he hadn't realised how much he'd needed that. Needed someone after he came home from the war.

She understood him on a level many didn't, because she was different too. Her father had been a merchant seaman, originally from Korea he and her mother settled in China and then

joined a group of Chinese people that came to England. Though he would never fully understand her, Will knew when she had explained how she felt caught between belonging and not, that she could understand him.

“Mrs Katz,” Will replied, giving her a nod as he hung up his hat and coat.

It was a small office they worked in, clerks for an accountancy firm, and a long way from the farm life Will had expected growing up.

He sometimes wondered if he should long for that life denied him, but he found he didn’t. Perhaps this was a better use of his intelligence and the skills he had learned at war. Perhaps it was simply because the world as it was before the war no longer seemed to exist.

That much was evident when he looked around the office. There were four of them, himself, Beverly, Miss Verger and Miss Hobbs. Before the war these positions would have all been men, though none like himself. None of them would have these jobs if the war hadn’t changed the very fabric of society, and if it hadn’t robbed them of so many men who no longer returned to these roles.

Will sat quickly at his desk as he felt his legs weaken a little. The image of the skeletal husk of Hannibal cast itself unbidden into his mind once more, triggered by the small thought of men who did not return.

Bev noticed and squeezed his shoulder as she passed to her own desk. She was used to these moments where memories, or simply his imagination, took him out of himself.

Will shuffled the papers on his desk, finding where he had gotten to the day before. Notes to type up and file and a list of ledgers to find that might take him a lot of the day down in the basement archives. He tried to ground himself, and tried not to think about how that dark basement often reminded him of the dugout he and Hannibal had liaised in. A temporary safe haven where they lost themselves in each other.

He had tried to find him, Hannibal.

Once when he was in Baghdad. Without Bloom’s knowledge or permission, he sent an enquiry in Bloom’s name to find out what he could about Hannibal’s fate after the horrific battle on the Somme. But he had never heard back. Likely the letter had been lost on the way there or else a reply lost on the way back, but he didn’t dare risk his position further by using Bloom’s name again.

When Will had returned from the war, the Lecter estate had been his second stop after reuniting with his father and mourning the loss of his mother. Another letter he hadn’t received, most likely lost somewhere on the Western Front and never having it’s course corrected.

But the big house had been sealed up, and Will was sure that could only mean one thing - Hannibal had never returned. When Will had steeled himself to ask in the town about the estate and the family, he had been told that his lordship had died in his bed during the war.

Tears pricked at the corners of Will's eyes as the emotions of that day flooded back to him. His vivid imagination filled in all the blanks. He could see Hannibal injured on the Somme, not killed outright but one of those slow deaths from inoperable wounds and infection. He imagined Hannibal returning to his family home to be nursed by the same servants who had watched him grow up, until finally his body was unable to remain tethered to the earth and his pain ceased for good.

Will cleared his throat and stood abruptly. He grabbed the list of ledgers from his desk and stalked to the basement stairs. The typing could wait, he couldn't face being amongst sympathetic looks and pity right now, he'd rather hide beneath the earth where so many people he loved already resided.

*

The pint of beer was set heavily in front of him a moment before Will realised that Bev had taken the seat next to him at the bar.

"They let anyone in here these days," he mumbled with every intention of her hearing, a small joke.

She laughed and slapped his arm, "you're a pill. Always so tough to swallow. That's the rumour at least."

Bev nudged him and Will felt his cheeks heat.

"Being crass doesn't suit you, Mrs Katz." Will grumbled.

"Oh, you're just a prude." Bev interjected, pushing the beer she had set in front of him so that it was right next to his almost empty glass. "Don't usually see you here on a work night."

Bev's words were cautious. She already knew that if he was there, he was having a hard time of it and just needed to be somewhere he wasn't as alien as he usually felt. Like a good friend, she was simply opening that door if he wished to discuss it, but he knew she wouldn't push if he didn't.

"Bad dreams lately," Will said, the only explanation he'd give and all she really needed. Her comforting hand was on his shoulder and then gone again after a quick squeeze.

"Well, I plan on having at least one more." Bev clinked her glass against his untouched beer and took a swig of her wine.

They sat in comfortable silence for long minutes, patrons coming and going through the heavy front door that always had a doorman on duty when open. From the outside this place might look like any other small private members club, and in essence it was. But it wasn't for the wealthy and landed, it was for those who needed a place to be themselves.

In fact, it was Bev who had introduced him to the place, vouching for him so that he might have membership.

At first Will had assumed that she knew of this place because of her heritage, knowing that she was happily married and so wasn't likely to be making female friends here like so many other female patrons. He had not expected, until she confided in him, that her husband was the same as Will, a lover of men.

They had known each other since childhood and he had wanted a wife in order to remain unsuspected, and she -with no real desire for anyone at all- had wanted a husband without the hassle of courting and other nonsense.

He had introduced her to this place, and she was more than happy for him to partake in all it might offer. Will wasn't sure they had ever even consummated their marriage, but that wasn't his business. All he cared about was having a friend and seeing her happy, which she was. The arrangement she had found herself in seemed to suit them both immensely.

"Why don't you…" Bev broke the silence, speaking tentatively before nodding her head towards the backroom.

Will had been in there before, when desperation had driven him and he had spilled hot into an eager mouth. But on the whole, it wasn't for him. It was just enough to be in this room of the outcast and unlawful and know that he belonged somewhere.

Will shook his head.

"I don't think it would help," he pulled on a smile. "I'll be alright tomorrow. I just need to get some sound sleep."

Will lifted his beer and gave a nod, indicating that he hoped the alcohol might assist with this, before he chugged down two thirds of it.

Will stood, "shall I walk you out?"

She smiled and shook her head, then jerked it towards the backroom. "He won't be long."

Will felt his cheeks redden once more. He was, of course, no blushing virgin, but it was still quite something to know about Bev's situation, and something else again to know that her husband was currently with a lover whilst she waited for him.

Even so, it was her openness about it when they were in this safe space that Will struggled to not find shocking. It really did seem such a world away from his boyhood on the farm.

"Good evening then, Mrs Katz." Will tipped his head and she smiled sweetly.

"Good evening, Mr Graham."

As Will walked home, he felt the warmth of the beer and the heaviness in his eyelids. He was sure to sleep much better.

The thought made him smile, a relief and a hope. But the smile and hope quickly faded once he reached his building and found Mr Crawford waiting for him on the doorstep.

“Will, I’m just back from your office. I went to see if you worked late, but… it doesn’t matter, you’re here now.”

Jack Crawford hurried Will into the building and before Will had chance to ask what was happening, the older man continued. “Your father needs you. I think… I’m sorry, Will. But I think this is it.”

Will felt almost out of his own body as Jack ushered him into his own apartment and towards his father’s room. Inside, Mrs Crawford sat holding Bill Graham’s hand, his breathing shallow.

He seemed so small, so weak and Will could no longer ignore how much his father had deteriorated in the last few weeks. Nor could he ignore that the imminent loss of his one remaining loved one was the source of his terrible nightmares.

Soon his father would join his mother and Hannibal in those hot streets of Baghdad that his mind conjured, dead and dried and set to haunt him forever.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Revelations and reunions as the past starts to catch up with everyone.

London. October, 1919

Will could go a long time without having to stand at another graveside.

How could the world still keep turning with so many dead?

He remembered his mother's grave. His father had taken him there, and it had seemed so unreal. He hadn't seen her with his own eyes as he had with his father, so in his mind it could not be her. A disconnect between what his heart wanted and the harsh reality of the world he now lived in.

The same was agonisingly true of Hannibal. That was a grave he was yet to find.

He hadn't sought it when he had been back to the town and seen the great house closed up. He couldn't then. It would have broken him beyond anything he could recover from.

Now his father was gone, he could venture further from home and return to the house. Go to the family plot and pay his respects to the man he had loved so desperately. Desperately enough that he would have been court-martialed had things been different.

The thoughts of those dry streets of Baghdad that haunted his dreams returned and he shook the thought away. Instead he tried to listen to what the minister was saying, kind words from a practical stranger about what a good man Mr Graham had been.

Will felt a hand on his shoulder and took a breath, needing the comfort. It was Bev Katz, a friend he so dearly needed. She and her husband and the Crawfords were the only ones in attendance. And despite the momentarily confused look on the minister's face, he had continued without paying much heed to the Asian and black people at the graveside.

It angered Will, after his time with the Arabs and Indians who had fought beside the British soldiers on their two fronts, that the minister reacted this way. But they would never see him again after this day. He was a temporary mourner simply here because his dad was a Christian and this was how he was to be buried. These others here were the ones that mattered and Will was grateful for them.

Even so, it was alone that he returned to his apartment. They all went their separate ways, allowing Will to grieve in his silent reflection. Knowing that eventually, if needed, Bev would pull him back from it.

The apartment was so quiet now. Not that his father had ever made much noise. It was empty and no longer felt like a home despite the pictures of them all that remained on the walls. His mother had never lived there, his father simply existed in the space. For a moment he mourned the loss of their old farmhouse on the Lecter Estate, but had to end those thoughts before they became too difficult to bear.

Will was startled by a soft knock at the door, as though all sounds were now too loud for this space.

Will was surprised to find Mrs Crawford at the door, her eyes still watery.

“I’m sorry, Will. I didn’t want to disturb you but… I thought you should have this and there never seemed a good time.”

She handed him an envelope, his name scrawled on it in his father’s weak hand.

“He gave it to me a few weeks ago and asked that I pass it to you once he was gone.” She choked a little on the words but then smiled at a memory, “he said he never paid for a lawyer a day in his life and didn’t intend to now just to deliver a letter.”

Will smiled at that too and let out a chuckle that then lodged in his throat.

“Thank you,” he managed, turning the envelope over in his hands as she nodded.

She reached out and squeezed his arm. “We’re here for you, Will. If there is anything you need.”

Will took in a deep breath and nodded, hoping his eyes conveyed how much he appreciated her words as he was too worried that if he tried to speak now he would only cry.

With another squeeze she released him and started off back to her own apartment, leaving him to shut the door behind her.

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Will waited until the evening to open the letter.

He poured himself whiskey and was on his second glass when he felt he had the courage to read his father’s last words to him. He had been so weak at the end that he had only really been able to tell Will how much he loved him. This might be the same, or it might be more, but either way Will knew his heart could only take so much. It felt like he had lurched from one loss to another for years and perhaps this letter might bring some closure. One last goodbye.

Will unfolded the paper and read the unsteady scrawl.

My dearest Will.

I hope you know that you were the very centre of our world. Your mother and I loved you more than words could ever express. You were a gift, a miracle that came to us.

You always knew that. That we had longed for you before you came. But there is more you must know.

Your mother and I talked about this so many times and I am ashamed to say that it was I that decided we should remain silent on these matters. And now as I am about to leave you alone in this world, I realise the disservice this has done you. Perhaps I have robbed you of a family out there that you might have known if I hadn't remained silent even after your mother was gone.

Will, I hope you remember as I tell you this, that you always were and always will be our beloved son.

But before you were ours, you were someone else's son.

As a baby you were abandoned, left in the hands of the servants at Lecter House. It was the housekeeper that knew our wish for a child and our years of childlessness. It was she who brought you to us so that we might raise you as our own and give you all the love and encouragement we possibly could.

From the day we saw your tiny face and your tiny fingers wrapped around mine, your mother and I knew you were our son. We were meant to be your parents and no one could love you more than we did.

We never knew more of your birth family. No one saw you being delivered to the house. But all these years I have kept you from knowing this, you might have been able to make enquiries. Might have found more and been reunited with parents and siblings you never knew of.

I'm sorry my selfishness and cowardice robbed you of that.

I cannot defend myself but to say, I love you with my entire being, my son. I hope you can forgive me.

Forever your loving father.

Will's chest hurt and he sucked in a deep breath, filling his empty lungs. And yet almost immediately he released it again in a wail that he was unable to keep inside.

London. December, 1919

"Hannibal? Hannibal Lecter?"

Hannibal turned at the familiar voice, a smile pulling at his lips as soon as he saw Alana Bloom.

"It is you, my word!" Alana moved forward bustled up in her winter coat and hat as she was and kissed his cheek. "I haven't seen you since--"

Her words died as she clearly saw the way Hannibal's smile froze for just a moment before he blinked away the memories at the near mention of the war.

“I didn’t know you were in London,” she continued instead.

“A recent move. My aunt has been living with me and it seemed wrong to keep her from the excitement of the city.”

Alana let out a tinkle of laughter and stepped next to him, clearly wishing to continue on her way in the chilled weather. She thread her arm through his, the useless one that he had tucked to his side, his hand in his pocket, now finding a use. They fell into a slow pace and continued along the busy city street.

“I was just ordering my father’s Christmas present. We’re in the London house now. Father saw fit to give the estate over to my brother and his wife. He and mother are much happier here, the social scene is keeping them busy now that they are both at leisure.”

Having been his next question, Hannibal was happy to learn that Sir Reginald had returned from war.

“I’m glad to hear they are thriving.”

“Hmm,” she hummed happily. “They’ll be happier once they marry me off. I’m the only concern they have left.”

Hannibal hummed in return and tried not to stiffen at the words. He knew both their parents had thought them a good match. And Alana was a very lovely young woman. Which made it all the harder to do the sensible thing and marry her, knowing that he would eventually make her as unhappy as he would be in that arrangement.

“You’re still young.” He commented eventually, drawing another light, lovely laugh from her.

“You sound so old.”

“War has a way of doing that,” he replied before pulling back on a smile and trying to ensure the mood did not drop. “Besides, I’m an invalid now. This arm is only useful for giving pretty ladies something to clutch as they walk, it would seem.”

She shook her head dismissively.

“You’re not as broken as all that. I’ve seen worse…” the last was added with some melancholy that made Hannibal wonder about the men in her life who had returned from war broken or hadn’t returned at all.

She changed the subject as they continued along.

“If you’re here, then what will become of your estate?”

Hannibal swallowed, a question that hung over him every moment of the day.

“I haven’t decided yet.” Was all he would say. Not wanting to learn how much the gossips had made of his uncle’s behaviour. Was it well known? He was sure he didn’t wish to know.

“I have such fond memories.”

“As do I.”

They smiled at each other fondly for a moment before continuing along.

“And where are you off to? Am I taking you out of your way?” Alana asked sweetly.

Hannibal placed his hand over hers as he walked, “not at all. It is a delight to have run into you.”

She chuckled, “I know you, Hannibal. You would say that even if I’m intruding upon your day.”

“Very true, but I couldn’t hope for a better intrusion.”

They walked along together in companionable silence and it was the most comfortable Hannibal had felt in a long time. A refreshing reminder of that life before. He could almost pretend this was ten years earlier, walking around his estate whilst Alana’s family were in residence for a hunting trip.

Such thoughts, inevitably, brought him back to Will. They might sometimes pass him and stop to converse. Alana always pleasant and kind to the workers on the Lecter estate and likely on her father’s too.

She squeezed his arm and Hannibal thought of how Alana really would have made him an ideal wife, if only he had that inclination.

“Come see my father some time,” Alana offered. “I’m sure he would love to see you.”

“I would enjoy that also,” Hannibal agreed.

“Perfect!” Alana replied as though this had been some sort of plan all along. “We are visiting my grandmother in France for Christmas and will return in the Spring. Mother is already pressing father to host a party once we return, as we haven’t had a large gathering at the house since we took up permanent residence. I will be sure that you and your aunt are on the guest list.”

Hannibal smiled, understanding completely. She wished to extend that invitation and have him see her father, but nothing so intimate as inviting him to dinner. Nothing that might have the flavour of courtship.

It might be for her good as well as his own, as he couldn’t say if she’d even be interested in his courtship, but it did make him wonder. There had always been a mischievous glint in her eye when they were teenagers, as though she knew a secret but would not divulge. He had wondered more than once if the secret was his own and she had made that realisation.

Whether or not this was the case, the obvious move towards nothing more than friendship and a family connection was welcome.

“I’m sure we would be honoured to accept. My aunt will especially welcome it, she has been out of society so long that a proper introduction to London would be a happy one.”

“It’s settled then.”

They came to the end of the street and Alana drew them to a stop. “I’m off to the milliner so I won’t hold you up any longer. But I am so happy to have run into you.”

She slipped her arm out from his and stood in front of him, her adoring smile melting his heart. He could see then that she was as happy as he was to see someone from those days before the war. Someone who brought back memories of a different time, a gentler time.

Hannibal reached out his good arm and gently took Alana’s hand, kissing the back of it.

“It has been my pleasure.”

Alana pulled her hand back and instead embraced him lightly, kissing his cheek before letting him go.

He watched her turn the corner before he started back the way he had come, retracing their steps. He had gone out of his way to walk with Alana and hadn’t minded one bit.

But he had the name of a recommended enquiry agent burning in his pocket. His next stop would be their office. And hopefully his last would be finding Will.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Will learns more about his secret past as we enter 1920.

Lecter Estate. January, 1920

Will only realised he'd been standing still for so long when his feet began to feel like blocks of ice. He stomped for a moment to warm them, the crunch of the snow underfoot echoing around the small graveyard.

Christmas and New Year had passed quickly and Will had been thankful for that. He had worked for much of it, losing himself in paperwork so that he could avoid thinking about anything. Even so, as he had anticipated, every night his parents walked with Hannibal through the streets of Baghdad as little more than dried husks.

There was a shadow there now too, something out of the corner of his eye that Will could never clearly see.

He knew that shadow was part of him, a part he had never known and now lingered on the periphery of his life.

His parents were still his parents. That he felt deep within his bones. They had raised him and loved him. He had known no other family but them and didn't have any regrets on that part. But now there was this shadow, this unknown. It was as if there was a part of himself he no longer knew.

That, he convinced himself, was the only reason that he had taken the train from London and returned to the Lecter Estate once more. The only lead he had on his birth family was the Lecter House.

He hadn't been sure what he'd find, but when he reached the house he found it was still boarded up. Most of the farmers on the estate had gone and those that remained he would get to shortly. But, now was the time he realised, that he had to find Hannibal's grave and pay his last respects.

He might never come back here again, not now. Not without good reason. So whether he was ready or not, he had to visit the family plot. And it was just inside its gates that he had spent long minutes standing in the snow, trying to will himself to move.

Finally, forced by the cold, Will pushed closed the creaky, half-frozen gate, and continued on through the small cemetery that sat on the Estate.

He had been here before, as a child. What adventurous child wouldn't explore a graveyard? But it had seemed different then. Scary and haunting, but now it was just old stones and overgrown grass, flecks of which pushed up through the snow. Will had the sudden thought that he should have come in the spring and brought flowers to brighten the place.

The newer graves were at the back, those at the front had headstones aged in the hundreds - belonging to the family who had owned the house before the Lecters. At the back there were only two stones and Will walked steadily towards them.

The larger stone did not belong to a real body, merely empty caskets that had symbolised loss. Will had a vivid memory of discovering the Lecter family had been on the Titanic, and to his shame his main emotion had been relief that Hannibal had not been with them.

The smaller stone across from it had not yet been engraved.

Will let out a small cry at that. He knew that these things could sometimes take time, and Hannibal dying with no heir had likely made it all the more difficult for processes to be followed. But to not yet even has his name transcribed in the stone that sat next to his parents? Will sucked in a breath, trying to unclench the fists he'd instinctively balled.

"Will?"

The gruff, old voice carried across the crisp air and Will looked up. On the path that ran alongside the small cemetery stood an old man. Will recognised him immediately as Mr McClane, another farmer on the estate. He lived on one of those closest to the house, and it was those furthest - like his family's own - that had been sold off. Those ones much easier to forget about.

"Mr McClane, how are you?" Will tried to sound bright but his voice cracked a little even though it truly was good to see a friendly face.

McClane nodded his head to the gravestones, "paying your respects?"

Will nodded and cleared his throat. He took one last look at the gravestones before making his way back to the gate and meeting McClane on the path.

"It's good to see you, how's your father?"

"He passed last month," Will murmured.

"I'm sorry to hear that. He was a good man. Terrible business, what happened here." Mr McClane replied, shaking his head. "Will you stop in for tea?"

"Of course, thank you."

They walked together to the farms and Will couldn't help but notice how many more were empty than he'd even expected.

"So many people have gone," Will commented.

McClane nodded and huffed out a breath of cold air. “Yes, only a couple of us left now.”

“But who is managing the estate? With no one here…”

“Matthew Brown. You might remember him? He’s the son of the old estate manager. His aunt was the housekeeper.”

Will nodded. He did remember the young man, but another question came to mind then as they reached the farmer’s cottage.

“The housekeeper, Mrs Brown, she was the housekeeper at the house for many years?” Will asked, following Mr McClane into the small, warm cottage.

The door closed behind them and McClane immediately set to taking off his gloves and moving a kettle onto the stove.

“Yes, quite some number of years. Since before the young lord was born.”

McClane indicated for Will to take off his coat and sit, which he did with thanks whilst Mr McClane continued making the tea.

“Did you ever hear of a baby being left at the house? Many years ago, when the younger Hannibal Lecter would have been very young.” Will said the words in more of a rush than intended, drawing first a raised brow and then a thoughtful look from McClane.

“Not that I recall. Seems like that would have been something of a scandal if it did happen. I’m sure it would have been kept quiet if it were the case.” McClane grew thoroughly silent, not speaking again until the tea was made and settled before them.

“If you’d have asked two year ago, I might have had a different answer for you,” McClane finally said.

Will frowned, “I don’t understand.”

“My wife, my second wife that is. She started out as a chambermaid up at the house. After my Elsie died and left me a widower with a small child, I was happy to form an acquaintance with Reba. We got along very well and in the end she left service and married me, became a farmer’s wife. But two years ago she passed. She had the influenza, never recovered from it.”

There was silence for a moment and Will set down his cup.

“I’m sorry to hear that. This has been a time for great loss.” Will replied.

McClane nodded, “indeed. More than some can bear. I think though, if there had been a foundling at the house, she’d have known about it. There’s a code you see, amongst people in service. They keep their master’s secrets, all the secrets really. I don’t think there would be any harm in sharing such secrets now. From so long ago with so many dead. But if it was something she knew, she never shared it with me. I don’t suppose it was something that would come up.”

McClane drew in a deep breath and let it out again, as though signalling the end to that line of discussion.

“You were in the army,” McClane changed the subject. “I know your parents were very proud.”

“Yes, sir. I was a Corporal, stationed in Baghdad towards the end of the war.”

McClane’s brows shot up, “so far away! What stories you must have to tell.”

Will tried to smile and gave a nod, trying hard not to recall much of it at all.

“And you’re in London now? Is that right? I recall your father saying that was where he would be going.”

Will nodded again, “Yes. I am a clerk there.”

McClane chuckled and shook his head. “Imagine that. As hard as you worked with your dad, you never did seem to quite fit on the farm. Always had something about you that set you apart. The young lord saw it I think. He was always hanging around trying to be your friend.”

Will found himself chuckling at the memories that kindled, even as it made his heart ache.

“What happens to the estate now?” Will asked, his thoughts now back with Hannibal.

McClane shrugged, “for now we just work as we always have. Mr Brown minds us. But I suppose eventually the family will either move back or will sell up. They’ve been gone since his lordship died, but if they’ll return?” he shrugged, “I suppose it’s not my business, beyond hoping that those of us left will be kept on if they do sell.”

Will nodded, “I hope so too, for your sake. The farmers here have endured enough.”

“Aye,” McClane lamented.

They finished their tea and Will knew he shouldn’t outstay his welcome, but he couldn’t help the niggling thought that the conversation had put into his mind.

“Mr McClane, you mentioned the family moved. Do you know if they took the servants, or would I find any of them in the town?”

McClane frowned as he tried to recall and then nodded.

“Some moved on, the younger ones, I recall that. I know one of the footmen is now over at Elm Hall. The butler, housekeeper and a few others, her ladyship’s ladies maid and such, all went with the family as far as I know. Couldn’t say where all the servants are now.”

Will nodded and gave a grateful smile.

He did not wish to have this shadow hang over him forever. Perhaps, if he could find her, the housekeeper would be able to tell him more about the situation of his birth.

“Do you know where the family went? London?” Will asked, hopeful.

McClane shook his head. “No, not London. They bid us all farewell with some gift baskets, which I thought was a kind touch from her ladyship, and I recall Mr Sugden saying they would be taking a house in Oxford. I thought it strange, until I remembered the young lord had been schooled there. Perhaps it holds memories for the family.”

“Perhaps,” Will smiled in agreement even as confusion settled. Would Hannibal’s aunt care much for where her nephew had been schooled? Perhaps the Lecter’s owned property there.

Either way, that would be Will’s next journey the next time he had days free.

Will thanked McClane and stood, feeling better for having received a warm welcome back to his childhood. He bid the man well before he started the cold walk back to the train station.

London. February, 1920

“Will, there’s a letter for you.”

Will looked up as Bev walked towards him with the post she had collected.

“For me?” Will ignored her rolled eyes at his questioning something she had already plainly stated, and wondered instead why someone would send post to his place of work.

“Looks fancy,” Bev commented as she set down the rest of the letters on the edge of his desk and turned the expensive envelope over in her hands.

When Will held out his hand she reluctantly passed it to him and remained at his desk.

“Do you mind?” He asked at which she grinned and shook her head.

“Oh, not at all. Carry on.”

Will huffed, realising she would not give him privacy, and opened the envelope. Inside was an invitation embossed on fine card. As Will pulled it out of the envelope a folded note dropped out with it and it was this he picked up first.

Handwritten on personalised stationery, it purported to be from the desk of Miss Alana Bloom. The omission that had earned his position with General Bloom raced to Will’s mind and sent a flush up his cheeks. Was there now some trouble from it all?

Dear Corporal Graham

My father has spoken fondly of you many times and I was recently reminded that a few of his company are in the London area. My parents have taken up residence in the capital and will be throwing an introductory party in March.

Of course, these things always go much smoother when there are folk attending that we already know, and my father counts you as a fond colleague. I too, I believe, count you as a childhood friend.

Will sucked in a breath at those words which made Bev stare at him all the harder. Miss Bloom clearly knew of his ruse then, but apparently her father didn't know or perhaps didn't mind.

I took it upon myself to look you up and a few other of the men that returned to London. I was thankfully able to find you working at the fine establishment where I hope my letter has found you. I do hope to see you to see you, I know my father will be thrilled to be reunited.

Very sincerely,
Alana Bloom

"Well?" Bev asked, eyes wide as he put down the letter and then looked at the card giving the time, date and a very upmarket address.

"My old commander, his daughter has invited me to a party at their house."

"And that's the reason you just went several different shades of pink and then so incredibly white?" Bev challenged.

Will huffed and shook his head, "It's unexpected, that's all. One doesn't expect invitations from nobility even after having served together in the army."

"No, *one* doesn't," Bev replied in a cheeky tone. She chuckled as she picked up the rest of the post to take through to the mailroom.

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"A letter arrived for you, sir." Sugden held out the small tray as the maid took Hannibal's coat and hat, now practised at removing it whilst being mindful of his arm.

"Thank you, Sugden." Hannibal replied politely, taking the letter from the tray and asking for some tea to be brought through before retiring to his study.

The day had not gone as well as he'd hoped. It was the last week of February and still the enquiry agent had little for him. Hannibal had to admit that it seemed the man was trying his best, but when it came to the war, the records were a mess and when it came to Will - a dead end.

Any records of Will's reassignment had either been lost or destroyed, and so now the agent was starting over entirely. He was going to assume that Will had returned from wherever he had been stationed during the war and go from there. His next course would be to start with the remaining farmers on the Lecter estate and go from there.

And whilst, in some ways, that seemed like progress - to Hannibal it was yet more waiting and trying not to hope.

He sat heavily in his chair and pulled out his letter opener, holding it in his good hand as he weighted the envelope with his other and sliced through the paper.

The contents, at least, brought a smile to his face, if only for the fact that it would be something pleasant for her ladyship and a distraction for himself.

Hannibal pulled out some stationery and began to write an acceptance to the Bloom's.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal's reunion draws closer.

London. March, 1920

Will ran a finger under his collar and looked at himself in the mirror. The shirt he had bought new, and it was stiff - over-starched. The tie was new too, but the suit itself Will had borrowed from someone of Bev's acquaintance… or her husband's.

Will wasn't too sure and didn't want to pry, but certainly Will knew no one with that sort of wardrobe. Bev had initially suggested he just wear the dress uniform that he had hanging in his wardrobe, full of moth balls. But Will didn't feel that was appropriate since he was no longer in the army. He didn't want to insult his host in any way.

Thankfully at least, the suit fit well, even if the shirt was uncomfortable. It took him several attempts to get the bow tie right, but once he had he knew he couldn't delay any longer. He didn't want to make a show of himself by being late, but he was also a little on edge about going. He remembered how out of place he had felt in the officer's mess. How clearly different he was from all those around him. Would this be more of that experience? Not from Bloom, he was a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, but Will was under no illusion that he didn't belong.

Even so, he didn't feel he was in a position to turn down the invitation. Not just the snub to his commanding officer, but also -as the note had hinted- he owed it to Miss Bloom to meet with her in person and make his lie a truth. And then, in turn, apologise.

Will took one last look in the mirror before heading out the door and steeling himself for the evening ahead.

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When Hannibal and Murasaki arrived at the house drinks were being served in the lobby. Cocktails, very new decade. It pulled a smile to Hannibal's lips, something new and interesting where he had expected the comfort of something more traditional. An echo of those by-gone days that they would never see again.

He felt Alana's hand in this, and was pleased to know it. The world needed people moving them on, he knew all too well how easy it was to let thoughts and feelings linger in the past.

"Hannibal!" Reginald Bloom's voice boomed beside him a moment before he felt the strong hand slap against his back. "Your Lordship, I should say. Feels like a lifetime since I've seen

you, m'boy."

"I believe it has been, Sir." Hannibal returned with a smile.

"I'm glad to see you returned."

Hannibal didn't miss the way Bloom's eyes darted to his arm and away again. Hannibal gave a strained smile, now very aware of his hand tucked into his dinner jacket.

"And Lady Murasaki, a pleasure!" Bloom thankfully turned his attention to Hannibal's aunt who offered her hand for a gentle shake. "Let me introduce my wife, I'm sure you'll be fast friends."

"That is my wish," Murasaki replied graciously and allowed herself to be led away from Hannibal.

As if on cue, Alana then appeared in her father's place.

"You can thank me later, but I made sure that you are on the other side of me for dinner. I know my father would love to talk about the good old days, but for a man who has seen war, he can be oblivious to the fact that the topic often makes people uncomfortable."

"Astute as always," Hannibal praised and gave a curt nod of thanks as she smiled at him.

He was glad he didn't have to say anything aloud, glad she'd been able to intuit that Hannibal had no desire to talk about the war or his family - the two things he had most in common with Sir Reginald.

As she had at their last meeting, Alana slipped her hand in his arm and began to walk him around to greet others, introducing him as an old family friend for those he had not previously met.

There were a couple of men in dress uniform and it was quite a surprisingly eclectic gathering. Hannibal tried not to think too much about how fewer people there were now than they had known before the war, before the influenza pandemic. He was determined that 1920 would herald a new age for him as he had read it was set to do for the whole world.

After a few more introductions, and a bright drink being plucked from a tray, Alana seemed ready to take her leave so that she might continue to be a good host to the others, and he could rejoin his aunt - who seemed deep in conversation with Alana's mother.

She pulled her arm from his but then stopped.

"Oh! You know, I have just remembered something amusing I meant to tell you. That young man you were friendly with from the estate. The farmer's son, Mr Graham?"

Hannibal went rigid at the name, feeling all the blood drain from his face as his body stilled entirely. Frozen, about to shatter.

“The most amusing thing. He turned up under my father’s command in Baghdad. Father wrote to me of his new private secretary, a personal friend of the Lecter family and it was clear he thought I must know him. I had some memories of course and placed immediately who he meant. Well, I hate scandal and so I went along with what the young man had said - that we had all been friends together. I wrote back to my father wishing him the best. Isn’t that the funniest thing?” She chuckled. “The war has made life so odd. I in--”

“Will was in Mesopotamia?” Hannibal asked before he had even realised the words had left his mouth.

“Indeed, small world isn’t it.” She replied in a jolly tone.

Hannibal was rooted to the spot, everything in his mind reordering. If Will had gone to the Eastern Theatre, then that would account for being unable to find records of him on the Western Front. All it had taken was for the record of the transfer to be missing or destroyed for Hannibal to assume he had remained somewhere on the Western Front. It was almost too much to process, every previous thought undoing itself and rewriting anew.

“Hannibal?” Alana’s concerned voice broke through. When he finally looked down at her she blinked. “Oh. Oh…” she stroked his arm. “I see… I did wonder.” Her words were so low that he barely heard them, and it was certain that no one else could.

“Is he alive?” Hannibal croaked, his throat dry. “Did he return from…”

“Oh Hannibal. What a difficult thing.” Alana’s tone and eyes were full of pity, but then she followed quickly. “He’s alive, he came home. He returned the same time as my father, they worked together here for a while and then he would have been decommissioned. I--”

Hannibal nodded, taking it all in, latching on one thing.

“Will’s alive.”

She looked nervous about continuing and Hannibal waiting patiently, saying nothing.

“If I tell you something I don’t want you to react, um, badly. Remember where you are, Hannibal. Remember you’re in polite company.” She looked furtively around at the distinguished company and then back to Hannibal. He drew in a deep breath and then nodded, unsure of what she could possibly say next.

“I invited Corporal Graham along this evening.”

*

Will cursed as he approached the grand London house. Due to a wrong turn, he was running late to a function he already felt he had no right to and knew he shouldn’t hesitate further, but he wondered if there was still time to turn back.

If it wasn’t for the social obligation he felt having already accepted, he might have done just that, but instead he grit his teeth and walked up the ornate steps to the house.

The front door was opened but the butler and Will exchanged a glance that made immediately clear that they both knew he really was out of place. But, as with the army, he'd suck it up and make it work. He wasn't the son of a farmer here, he was a corporal of His Majesty's army, and that was how he gave his name.

"Corporal William Graham," the butler announced him to Sir Reginald who immediately grasped Will's shoulders.

"Will, m'boy. So good to see you. You know Smythe," Will nodded as he turned to face one of the other officers who had served with Bloom currently standing next to the general.

"Of course, good to see you, sir."

"And you, Graham." Smythe's tone was unconvincing and he wasn't discrete in the way he looked Will up and down as they shook hands.

A few more minutes of pleasantries and Sir Reginald took his leave to greet other guests, leaving Will and Smythe together.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Graham. Didn't you come from farming stock?"

"I'm a clerk now." Will corrected, taking a drink from a passing tray. He had no idea what it was but it smelled both sweet and sharp and went down very smoothly.

Smythe let out a slight huff of amusement at Will's admission, still not the right calibre for this party, that much was clear.

Before either of them could speak further they were joined by a young woman who greeted Will as an old friend.

"Will, it's so good to see you. It's been years. I think the last time must have been on the Lecter Estate." As an afterthought she turned to Smythe and added much less enthusiastically. "Lieutenant Smythe, it's good to see you too."

She turned back to Will, her whole attention on him, "how are you settled in London, Will? It's very different from back home."

That was enough for Smythe to know he had been snubbed, and he took his leave of them. As soon as he had, Will turned to the young woman and spoke with her in a low voice.

"Miss Bloom, I--"

"Alana, please." She corrected him.

"I apologise for any mistruths I pulled you into. It was unintentional, your father mistook me for someone of greater import and I failed to correct--"

Alana laughed, a bright and joyful sound, as she shook her head.

“No harm done. And of course, Will. Having now put a face to the name, I do remember you from my visits. I don’t believe we ever said more than a few words to each other but you made an impression.” She paused for a moment and continued wistfully, “not just on me.”

Will cocked his head and frowned.

“There’s someone here who would very much like--”

Alana was cut off by the dinner gong.

“Dinner is served,” the butler stood at the dining room entrance to make the announcement, and with the sound of chatter and glasses being set down, guests began to make their way through.

Alana took Will’s arm and made to lead them in, but Will stopped her. She had saved him from Smythe, but now he had an evening ahead of him explaining who he was and why he was there. He couldn’t really even own the rank any more now that he had been decommissioned. He was a farmer turned clerk, this was not a place for him, nor did he want it to be, Smythe had clarified that for him. He realised as the throng moved, that he was his own man now, with his own destiny and he could not bear the thought of spending an evening in this place pretending he was anything other than he really was.

“Miss Bloom, I beg your understanding and forgiveness. I appreciate your invitation and it was good to see your father so hale and healthy, but this isn’t a natural environment for me. I’m afraid I won’t be much of a guest.”

“Nonsense,” she insisted, “besides there’s someone-” She looked around her, trying to find another guest, that much was clear. As kind as she was, even she was trying to take her leave of him.

“I am grateful for the kind invitation Miss Bloom,” he repeated, “but I realise now that I shouldn’t have accepted.”

He unwound her arm from his own and with an apologetic smile gave a curt nod. “Please pass your apologies to your father. Tell him I was feeling unwell. I will write to him with thanks and apologies myself.”

Her expression became resigned as the guests thinned out and they were almost alone. He was sure she understood his position well enough. And being at this party only perpetuated the lie he had dragged her into, as kind as she had been to go along with it. That wasn’t something he had ever desired, and he planned to write her a note in the morning to apologise once more.

A few of those lingering glanced back at them now and Will knew that neither of them wanted a scene and that she should take her seat.

“Of course,” she agreed, letting Will go.

*

“Where were you?” Alana practically hissed the words under her breath at Hannibal as she took her seat next to him. She had been one of the last into the dining room and her smile seemed somewhat forced.

“Has something happened?” Hannibal asked, trying to keep his focus on her but unable to stop his gaze from wandering, seeking Will.

“I couldn’t find you.”

“I stepped out for a moment, I needed the air.” Hannibal explained. And that much was true, but he had also hoped that he would encounter Will, away from everyone else. It was all he could do to stop himself running from room to room to try and find him.

“I was speaking with Will.” Alana spoke quietly.

“Will? Where is he, I haven’t-”

“A terribly unremarkable man called Smythe cornered him and made some ungentlemanly comments. Will asked me to make his apologies to my father and left. I couldn’t see you anywhere.”

“I came in as they rang the gong and came straight in here.” Hannibal’s words came out a little broken and his throat ached.

“Where is he now?”

“He just left. I asked him to stay, but I-”

Hannibal went to rise and immediately felt Alana’s hand clamp down on his arm.

“Hannibal, please, behave. You’re seated now, dinner is being served.”

Hannibal sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He knew Will was alive now, alive and well in London. Alana knew where he might be found. He could locate him tomorrow with very little effort.

Alana was right. He must behave like a gentleman.

He opened his eyes again to see that the servants had just come in with the trays. Everyone was engaged in chatter. The room was abuzz with so many guests in this grand dining room. It rang in his mind, giving him a slight headache. How could he have been so close and then missed him? Hannibal set down his napkin.

“I’m sorry, Alana. You are a dear friend and I love you and your parents.” He spoke as he rose from his chair. “Please tell your parents and my aunt that I felt suddenly unwell.”

Alana’s jaw tightened and she glared daggers at him, but as he said “I have to find Will,” her expression softened and her lips quirked up at the corners. Yes, Alana Bloom knew his secret, and she wasn’t about to stop him.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal discovers a different side of London, which makes him rethink a great many things.

Hannibal left without picking up his hat and coat, running immediately out into a light shower of rain that had been threatening on his way in.

The street was empty in either direction and Hannibal calculated that at least ten minutes must have passed since Will had left.

Going in either direction seemed as fruitless as the other. He had no reason to know or believe that Will had gone a certain way.

He looked down as he reached the bottom step down onto the street from the townhouse. The rain, little as it was, moistened the grime that covered the road enough to show no tracks from cars or any other vehicles.

It struck Hannibal immediately, his heart skipping a beat. Will must have left on foot. That at least meant he might catch up if he chose the correct direction.

He scanned over the street, the sky having darkened since his arrival and the lamplights not nearly good enough for his needs. But there, an uneven part of the road held a puddle, and before and after it the harder tread of someone jumping over it.

It was as good a bet as any, so Hannibal walked forward, making the same jump himself as well as the assumption that their angling to the left meant that that was the direction in which their owner went.

There were no more footprints and the rain, growing harder with every passing moment, was now washing away any evidence there might have been.

At a clip, Hannibal began to trot along the street, not caring for the way the puddles and sodden grime threw filth up onto his trouser legs. His dinner jacket was soaked through by the time he reached the end of the street and was once more lost to possibilities.

If he went left again he knew more affluent houses would emerge before him. It seemed unlikely, barring some especially good fortune that he was sure Alana would have mentioned, that Will would live in such an area.

So he struck out right, turning his collar up, which did nothing to stop the rain soaking through to his shirt.

It was pointless. He knew that. He would have been better off staying at the party and getting what information he could from the Blooms. But his need was too great. He wouldn't have been able to sit there and endure all those courses and the polite company, the cigars afterwards, whilst knowing that Will was alive and somewhere in London.

Somewhere so very close. He'd search the streets all night if he had to.

A lump rose in Hannibal's throat as he continued, wandering aimlessly now down some of the less scrupulous areas in this part of the city. His shoes groaned with the wetness, sodden and heavy.

Hannibal drew in a sharp breath and stopped.

He wriggled his toes, feeling the squelch of moisture there, and remembering.

For a moment he was back in the trenches, the rain battering down on them. Impossible to get dry or stay dry for days on end. Men with trench-foot who had to be moved from the front lines to the hospital for treatment. Replaced by others that might meet the same fate if the rains didn't stop.

Hannibal felt a sympathetic, phantom tingling in his right foot.

"Hey!" A voice called out and Hannibal realised that he stood next to a door that had now been thrown open, the light and sound from within now spilling out onto the street.

A bar.

A man, swaying in his hat and coat, was holding open the door.

"Are you going in, or what?" He asked gruffly, frowning at Hannibal and then looking him up and down with a smirk that said perhaps he was a little overdressed for the establishment.

"No, thank you." Hannibal finally managed.

The man shrugged and let the door swing closed. "Fair enough, not much goings on in there tonight anyway. If you're looking for somewhere with stronger liquor and more lively company, you can tag along with me if you like."

The man didn't wait for an answer as he stepped off the curb and started to cross the road.

The rain had stopped, Hannibal realised, and he was standing on a random London street looking for a needle in a haystack. Full of unobtainable purpose and a head for poor decision making, Hannibal followed after the man, thinking that strong liquor sounded very good indeed.

*

It was still early when Will returned to his apartment, though late enough for dinner, as his stomach informed him.

He took off the borrowed suit and laid it out to dry. He'd get it dry-cleaned before giving it back to Bev, not that it was likely to have been soiled in any way. He didn't stay long enough for that.

Dressed once more in his usual clothes, Will made himself a cheese sandwich and settled in his armchair.

It had been a strange evening, and whilst it had been nice to see his old commander, and to have finally cleared the air with Ms Bloom, he didn't regret leaving early.

As much as he had enjoyed Hannibal's friendship on and off, and as much as his position in the East had socially elevated him, he wasn't one of them. He never would be.

Whoever his real family were, wherever they were, Will was farming stock through and through. Had there been no war, that was what had awaited him. Had his family not lost their farm, he would be there now.

Will thought of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, their fanciful creations that he might now be living in. Looking back, as horrifyingly real as it had been at the time, there was such a strange surrealness to the war. Had he truly been so far from home? Another country, so different from his own. Had that really happened? Had he been reunited with Hannibal in the trenches, had their love been real?

Or maybe it was his childhood on the farm that was all a fantasy that he would wake from.

This evening had set Will off-kilter. He had lost his equilibrium. And for that he was glad not to have stayed longer.

Instead he ate his sandwich and then went to bed to a fitful sleep and more dreams of those dry streets and the days that felt hotter than hell.

London. April, 1920

With Spring came a liveliness to London that Hannibal was glad to see his aunt take part in. She and her ladies maid had settled well, even if some of the staff were still unsure. It seemed to be no secret that, whilst they didn't especially prefer Oxford over London, they weren't entirely settled.

Hannibal found himself in a constant internal conversation over this - whether releasing the staff so that they might have stayed where they were, or uprooting them but keeping them in employment was the right choice. Ultimately he had to believe that if any of them had been so repelled by the thought of leaving the old estate and town, then they would have tendered their notice.

A childishly simple view, he knew, given their loyalty to the family and dwindling job prospects.

It did make him wonder though, if not for knowing Will was in London, would he have gone back to the Estate eventually? He couldn't even remember what he had considered before.

Everything had changed since discovering Will was alive.

It had been ten days since that night, and he hadn't yet contacted Alana for Will's contact information.

Folly, in some respects, but he schooled himself now - as she had tried to - in patience.

It wasn't just that contacting Alana required a gentle touch after how he had left the party, though he had sent his apologies and an excuse of sudden illness to the Blooms the very next day. There were also the other events of that evening to consider.

He had followed that man to a private club unlike any Hannibal had ever experienced before.

There they had taken a seat together and Hannibal had observed all manner of folk around them.

The man had introduced himself as Able Gideon and he was a doctor. A windower and a heavy drinker, who apparently knew someone involved in the running of this club. He knew they would never turn him away, and would look after him should he drink too much, he vouched for Hannibal's entry despite their minute's old acquaintance.

They were joined a little while later by the man's friends - a Jew named Benjamin Katz and a black man named Tobias Budge who had fought in the war and lost a leg for his troubles. It was Tobias who noticed the way Hannibal held his arm, nodding to it and saying, not asking, "war."

Hannibal had nodded and, strangely, felt immediately comfortable in this room full of misfits. Those who, for one reason or another, didn't quite fit with the London society beyond the doors of the establishment.

In the last ten days he had been back once more, and tonight he would return again.

For the first time he was diverted from his search for Will, discovering what it was to perhaps have the sort of life he'd thought was impossible.

He wanted Will to be at his side in this discovery, but equally felt the need to protect Will from anything detrimental. He wished to spend more time at this place, evaluate whether it was really the haven it seemed to be, before finally reaching out to Will and drawing him into this place. A haven they might be able to have together.

Hannibal's quickened pace as the sun began to set, made it clear how eager he was for that reunion. He would spend every evening there if he could, making sure that he could provide them both with the world they had longed for when they were on the front.

It was a different man on the door this evening, but when he gave his name they let him in with a nod.

Not that it was his name. He hadn't dared give that when first brought along. Instead he had told Able and subsequently the others in the club, that his name was James Price.

“James!” Hannibal’s attention was called as he walked through the door, and immediately he saw Ben Katz sitting at the bar with a very beautiful young Asian woman.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement and made his way over, taking a seat on the other side of the man.

“My wife, Beverly,” Ben introduced, leaning back so that Hannibal and the lady could shake hands.

“A pleasure,” Hannibal smiled but didn’t miss the way she eyed him, appraising him, or his veracity.

“You must be Jimmy,” she acknowledged as they released each other’s hands. “Ben mentioned you.”

“James,” Hannibal corrected, drawing the line at such an informal moniker, and that earned a grin from her.

Ah, he was being tested. He liked her already.

It was then that Hannibal realised Ben was still leaning back, but not to let them converse. He was watching a young man on the other side of the room. Hannibal didn’t miss the smile that passed between them and then he turned to his wife and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later.”

“I won’t wait up,” came her good natured reply.

He turned to Hannibal with a lopsided grin, “sorry to leave you, but I assure you, Bev is fantastic company.”

Benjamin Katz was gone before Hannibal could respond.

“He’s not wrong,” Mrs Katz said, making Hannibal startle a little as he hadn’t realised she had moved to her husband’s now vacated seat. “I’m the life and soul at all the parties.”

Her smile was soft and welcoming, and it put Hannibal at ease as everyone here had previously.

All the same, Hannibal found his attention drawn to Mr Katz, who now stood over the other side of the room with the young man, talking in a very intimate fashion. They laughed and clearly flirted and, eventually, let themselves through a door at the back of the room.

“What is that room?” He asked in as delicate a tone as he could, very aware of the fact that her husband had just entered it with another man. “I noticed people going in there last time I was here.”

“The backroom. It’s, um… a private room.” She eyed him again. “I don’t know enough about you to know how to tell you without making you blush.”

“Do I look as sheltered as all that?” Hannibal asked, despite wondering whether he did want to know.

“It’s a room for, um, private assignations.”

Hannibal’s mind had been on the verge of that assumption, but this woman sat before him with her husband having just entered that place.

She chuckled and waved a dismissive hand, “oh it’s alright. You’ll get used to that sort of thing in here. It’s not what you’d call a conventional place.”

Hannibal did not blush, but there was something scandalous about the existence of such a room, of this place entirely. Even more so at the thought of bringing Will here, would he be scandalised? Or would he see freedom in it? Hannibal wasn’t sure.

*

Bev answered the door when Will returned the clothes.

It was early evening and he’d picked up the dry cleaning on the way home. It was pricey, social climbing came at a cost. One which he was happy to decline.

“Ah, just the man!” She took the clothes from him and set them inside before grabbing her coat and ushering him back onto the street. With her arm in his she led the familiar way to the club.

“Bit early isn’t it? Even for you?” Will smiled.

“You know, I met the most interesting man the other night and I think you’d actually hit it off. He’s not what he’s pretending to be, I know that. And I’m not even sure he’s going by his real name.” She chuckled.

“And you think this is someone I’d want to meet?” He looked over at her with a frown and a smirk, wondering if this wasn’t just another one of her little jokes.

“Actually yes, there’s something about him that’s just… interesting. Y’know? He’s an intrigue. I know you like a good mystery.”

“Which reminds me, you still have my copy of The Singing Bone-”

“Psh,” she dismisses him again. “Anyway, the name he goes by is Jimmy Price, but I’m--”

“Jimmy Price?” The name was instantly familiar, one that he had known from Hannibal. A man who had served with Hannibal before Will, on the front. “What does he look like?”

“Um, attractive. Tall, very defined cheekbones. He’s got a bum arm from the war. He thinks he’s passing himself off as working class but I’d bet money on him being a toff.”

“Jimmy Price…” Will muttered. Could it be someone who knew Hannibal?

He allowed Bev to keep him moving ever onward to the club.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

It's April 1920 and finally, an unexpected reunion in the most perfect location.

London. April, 1920

Bev and Will sat at the bar, the usual spot Bev occupied when she was there without Ben or he was in the backroom. She just enjoyed the people watching, with a view directly on the door, and tonight Will eagerly, if silently, joined her in the pursuit.

He watched it more intently than she did, despite having no clue what Jimmy Price looked like.

“Will, you need to relax.” Will could hear the concern that laced the humour in Bev’s words. “What’s going on?”

“The name, it’s familiar. I think he might know someone I knew in the war. He’s passed now but I guess… it would be nice to find out more about the end. And perhaps this man knows.”

Will didn’t need to look at Bev’s expression to know there would be pity in it.

“Oh, I’m sorry Will. Someone you were… close to?”

“The closest,” Will choked out the words and then downed his drink.

“He might not even be here tonight, don’t get your hopes-” Bev stopped as the door opened and man walked in, removing his hat as he did so.

Will’s eyes snapped to the man too, but it was apparently not Price, when Bev called out, “Able, join us.”

The man hung up his coat and hat with a smile and did as bid, taking the seat next to Will.

“You know Will?”

“I have seen him around, but not sure we’ve ever been properly introduced.” Able said with a charming smile before holding out his hand. Will took it and shook, trying to be polite despite his jangling nerves.

“Is Ben here?” Able asked.

Bev shook her head, “just the two of us tonight. Though I was hoping we might run into James Price.”

“Ah!” Able answered, a sly smile growing on his face as he gave Will an appraising look. “Trying to bait him into finally using the backroom.”

“Hey!” Will protested, at the same time Bev did.

“I’m sure that if he ever wishes to, he will.” Bev replied, sternly. “Stop pushing people.”

Able let out a huff of dismissive laughter and then ordered a drink.

As a couple of hours passed, Will and Bev had a few more drinks and sat in conversation. The door never quite forgotten, but Will was beginning to relax. The last few times it had opened he hadn’t even immediately turned. But then-

“James! Come join us,” Able called out.

Will turned to look at the man, wondering if it was the same man Hannibal had spoken of. His back was turned, hanging his coat with a practised motion given that one arm was heavy at his side.

War, of course.

Will left out a heavy sigh of understanding. He’d been one of the lucky ones, he knew that.

The man turned then to greet them. James, this man James.

Will went completely still, feeling every drop of blood drain from his face.

Was he finally going mad? Were his nightmares seeking him during the day now? Or was he indeed sleeping? Had he dreamt the entire evening?

“Oh god,” he muttered, now starting to shake, a tear rolling down his cheek. He didn’t know why. Was it fear? Hope?

“Will? You’ve gone so pale.” Bev’s hand was on his arm, gripping gently.

The man by the door was equally still, and when that was noticed it was Able that asked, “What’s going on?”

“Hannibal,” the name came out as barely a whisper. When the man took one step forward, Will moved from his stool, almost stumbling as he did so and then took a pace back.

What was this?

Hannibal was dead. He’d seen the gravestone, hadn’t he? Everyone had said his lordship had died.

“I’m going mad,” Will said quietly to himself.

“Will,” this time it was Hannibal’s voice, and he walked forward again, there was no room amongst the tables for Will to back up further. No place to run.

“Do you know him?” Bev asked, now off her own stool and standing next to him.

“He’s dead. I.. I can’t.” Will turned, an attempt to work his way through the tables. But then a strong arm wrapped around him. A strong arm, that brought him to a warm chest and a head on his shoulder.

“Will. Will, my darling, Will.” Hannibal muttered against his neck.

Will could hear the murmur around the room, the attention being drawn to them. He could hear Able and Bev talking quietly to each other, asking what was going on.

“You’re dead,” Will managed to croak out the words.

“No, just wounded.” Hannibal replied, still not letting him go. Arm wrapped tight, a sensation that Will remembered and longed for. One he dreamt about and cried over.

“His lordship is dead,” Will repeated the words he’d heard many times.

“My uncle. He died. I returned. My aunt and I moved to Oxford and then here.”

“No,” Will shook his head. “That can’t be true. I’d have known… I’d have…”

The tears were streaming down his face now, near blinding him.

“I thought you might be dead too. I couldn’t find you. But then the Blooms… And I was at their party. I just missed you. Alana told me you left, and I went after you. Made an absolute ass of myself.”

A chuckle escaped from Will then, the idea of proud and pompous Hannibal walking out of a dinner party.

“I couldn’t find you, but instead this place found me--”

“But then…” Will shrugged and turned, Hannibal loosening his grip so their eyes could meet. “You could have found me. Alana knew my place of work. That party was--”

“I know,” Hannibal’s tone was soothing. He studied Will’s face, as though cataloguing it, checking for injuries. He released Will then, so that he could run his good hand up into Will’s hair. “I’m sorry for waiting. I found this place and wanted to know if we could have the life we desired together. Once I was sure, I wanted to bring you here and show that a future for us could be possible.”

Will knew, to Hannibal, that made some sort of sense. He always wanted something for them that Will knew was impossible.

Will slumped against Hannibal, resting his head on the man's shoulder.

"Is this real? Are you real?"

"Yes, yes." Hannibal muttered against his ear as they fell into an embrace.

Long minutes passed whilst they just stood there, holding each other as best they could. Will's arms trembled, and Hannibal held him with only one arm.

Neither of them noticed Bev until she said quietly, "I guess you know each other."

Will had no words, so was glad when Hannibal replied for both of them, a soft, "yes."

There was peace again for a few more minutes, though Hannibal drew back and forced them to look at each other. He moved his arm from around Will to wipe the tears from his cheeks. In turn Will reached for Hannibal's other hand, finding it by Hannibal's side and lifted it to his lips. Something had happened there, Will knew. He knew enough of war to know that.

A gentle hand on Will's shoulder finally pulled them from each other.

"Freddie says you can talk in her parlour upstairs, if you need some space."

Will looked over and the landlady gave him a nod and a soft smile.

"Thank you," Hannibal replied for them both once more.

*

"I should regret not coming to find you after the party. But, I cannot. Not when being reunited here…" Hannibal trailed off, at a loss for the words, but Will nodded his understanding.

They both stood in the upstairs parlour, the sound from the bar below barely a hum beneath them. This wasn't the reunion Hannibal had imagined, but he knew it really was the best one they could have.

"We couldn't have had this elsewhere." Will agreed, and Hannibal read the pain in his face. Perhaps, as he was, Will was imagining what it might have been like to have been reunited at the Blooms. How they would have had to school their reactions. How painful it would have been to be so close and yet have to remain apart for the sake of propriety.

Elsewhere too, even meeting in the street, how they would have had to comport themselves in polite society. How they couldn't embrace like lovers reunited.

Hannibal closed the space between them and pulled Will against him with his good arm.

"Thank god, thank god for this place and for you. I feared I would never find you." Hannibal breathed the words against Will's hair. "You were in the East?"

Will nodded, sagging against Hannibal and wrapping his arms around him, he spoke the words pressed against Hannibal's chest.

"I was transferred East, ended up under Sir Reginald's command. I… misled him. He thought I was a friend of Miss Bloom's, a better friend to your family than I was. So I became his secretary. I had it easy compared to many."

Hannibal could hear the guilt in Will's words as he felt him take hold of the hand on his dud arm and raise it to his lips again.

Hannibal kissed his forehead. "There could be no better friend than you, Will. My first and best friend. My everything."

Hannibal held him tightly with his good arm.

"And you," Will sobbed, "Hannibal…" Will's words trembled.

"Don't," Hannibal replied softly. "I too fared better than others. And now that I have you again, and this means nothing." He indicated his arm. How could he ever explain that losing Will was so very much worse than losing use of a limb?

"I thought you were dead." Will wailed softly, both hands moving to Hannibal's lapels and gripping them tight.

"I'm so sorry. I wish I'd found you sooner. I tried… I have an enquiry agent…" Hannibal tried to placate the desperation in Will's voice, knowing that it truly wasn't anger.

"I saw your gravestone…" Will whispered, breaking Hannibal's heart.

"No. No, not mine. My uncle's. We hadn't engraved it. The… There was ill feeling with the farmers and we couldn't decide on an inscription, and…" Hannibal felt his heart breaking for Will, knowing what had happened to his family. "I am so sorry for what happened, how your parents suffered."

"It wasn't your fault." Will's reply was clipped.

"I should have done something-"

"We were at war, Hannibal." Will pulled back and looked at him with red rimmed, watery eyes. "What on earth do you think you could have done?"

Hannibal felt a tear roll down his own cheek.

Will reached up and wiped it away with his thumb.

"It's over now. It's in the past. Let's leave it there. We'll leave it all there." Will's voice broke over the words and they collapsed against each other again in silent tears.

*

Will startled awake, not realising he had even fallen asleep.

He felt a sort of panic come over him, not quite knowing where he was and deathly afraid that reuniting with Hannibal had been a dream. He sat bolt upright, a blanket falling off of him as he did so.

Then there was a murmur next to him and he turned, looking down at Hannibal and taking in the sight. He looked peaceful, serene.

They were still in the parlour, the dawn light coming through the curtains. They were leaning against each other on a threadbare couch and someone, presumably the landlady, had placed a blanket over them.

Will was still watching Hannibal when his eyes blinked open, a soft smile creeping over his lips.

“How I long to see you first thing every morning,” Hannibal murmured, reaching his good hand up to stroke Will’s cheek.

Will returned the smile, his heart swelling with the same wish.

Will let Hannibal’s hand guide him down until their lips met in a soft kiss. A peck, and then another. Then something deeper but still oh so soft and tender.

They parted on a sigh.

“Come stay with me,” Hannibal urged. “I have a guest room, every need can be met.”

Will enjoyed the thought of it for a moment, entertaining what could only be a fantasy. Then he shook his head.

“I can’t.” He muttered, wishing it could all be so very different. “Not when I’d want to wake with you every morning, hold you, be near you. But to do so would be a quick scandal. It would be like being in the trenches again. I can’t do that.”

Hannibal was so good still at schooling his expression, but all the same, Will saw the smile drop a little.

“I’m sorry,” Will continued.

Hannibal shook his head, “I understand. You’re perfectly right.” He pulled Will close again, murmuring against his mouth, “at least we have this place.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal long to spend the night together.

London. May, 1920

Every morning since the day they had woken in the upstairs parlour of the club, Hannibal awoke with the same thought in his mind.

How might they make this work? How might they be together? How could he fix it so that they could wake together everyday?

It was so aggravating to have fortune and standing and yet be able to do nothing with it, gain nothing from it, in the way that mattered the most.

Were Will a woman he would simply introduce her to Lady Murasaki and the likes of Alana Bloom, bring her into the social fold. There would be some raised brows of course, rumours of gold digging on her part, advantage taking on his. But a season later and it would all be forgotten, especially if she charmed easily.

If only. If only such a thing were possible between two men.

He consoled himself with the fact that Will was alive. They met every few nights or so at the club. As often as aroused no suspicions for either of them, and thankfully Murasaki just seemed pleased that Hannibal was finally becoming social again.

On the days when they could not meet, they might send the occasional missive, which Hannibal enjoyed more than he could say. Being delivered a note with a few gruff lines from his love, filled his heart with unspeakable joy.

Those evenings they had together, were only evenings. Not nights.

As wonderful as it was to sit together in the club, in a tucked away table leaning together as they talked, or at the bar with their growing friendship group, they both wanted more. Not desperate enough to use the backroom, not yet. They were both eager to be alone together in a way they had not had a chance to be in many years, but it simply wasn't that easy.

It is this thought that consumes Hannibal as he takes a seat at their usual table.

"Evening, Jimmy." Bev Katz grinned at him as she took a seat across the small table from him. "Will's on his way, he asked me to let you know he got caught up at the office."

Hannibal gave a nod and a smile but narrowed his eyes all the same. He really did like Mrs Katz, though her teasing did grate somewhat. She had known his real name since Will vouched for the trustworthiness of his friends, and yet she enjoyed pulling his leg.

“James,” he corrected, teasing back a little. She smirked.

They chatted pleasantly for a few minutes until her husband arrived and then Will. Eventually, the couple bid them good evening and moved to the bar, leaving Will and Hannibal alone.

“This is nice,” Hannibal murmured against Will’s temple as they leaned close to each other.

“Seeing each other? Yes.” Will hummed his reply, sinking against Hannibal.

“Yes, but also being friendly. Socialising as couples do.”

“Hmm,” Will’s response was a little lacklustre and Hannibal knew not to pursue the line of thought. He would only object once more that Hannibal was being fanciful and unrealistic. What they had here was a bubble. And one that could potentially be popped.

Hannibal was about to change the conversation to avoid annoying Will, when Will did it for him.

“Hannibal, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.” Will, who was initially looking down at his hands, looked up and must have seen the worry in his expression. “Nothing bad,” Will smiled and then squeezed Hannibal’s thigh. “Well, I guess not bad.”

“You can tell me anything, Will.” Hannibal took the hand that was on his thigh and squeezed it, concerned. And fearful too. His immediate thought was that, if it was not about them directly, then it might be about what happened with Will’s parents on the estate, before his uncle died.

He steeled himself for it.

“I found out, that is… My father left me a letter, on his deathbed. To let me know that I wasn’t his. Wasn’t theirs…” Will drifted off a moment before Hannibal could sense he was about to choke on the words. “They adopted me.”

“Will, I…” Hannibal wasn’t sure how to respond other than to squeeze his hand again and shuffle a little closer so that there was no space between them.

“Here,” Will choked on the word as he reached into his pocket and handed a folded letter to Hannibal.

He took it and unfolded it gently, the letter had been read many times, that was clear.

After he finished reading the very personal note, Hannibal handed it back and placed his hand to the back of Will’s neck - guiding him forward until their foreheads were pressed together.

“My darling, anything I can possibly do, I shall.”

Will pressed his lips to Hannibal's just a gentle kiss before pulling back. "I know, I know you will, Hannibal. I… need to talk to your parent's old housekeeper."

"Mrs Brown?" Hannibal asked.

Will nodded, "yes. Do you know where I can find her?"

*

"Will Graham, this is my aunt. Lady Murasaki."

"Ma'am," Will bowed his head and took her offered hand, allowing a dainty shake.

"Delighted, Mr Graham." She took a seat on one of the couches in the parlour, signalling for he and Hannibal to do the same. "Hannibal tells me that you are an old friend of the family."

"Yes ma'am, I grew up on the estate. My father was his lordship's pigman."

Her smile twitched for a moment, but didn't falter, and Will knew she was experiencing some sort of emotion. She knew, after all, the devastation her husband had caused. He wished he could allay her concerns, but there was nothing he could say and it not be a lie.

So Will was glad when Hannibal took a seat next to his aunt, across from Will, and spoke.

"Yes, a very well respected family on the estate. And then, of course, Will and I served on the Western Front together. We've recently been put back in touch thanks to the Blooms."

That drew a sharp look from Murasaki to Hannibal, though she said nothing.

Of course, they had both shared with each other the details of that evening from their own perspectives. That near miss, or near hit. Whatever it had been. He knew that Hannibal had left under very impolite circumstances whilst his aunt had remained.

"Yes, it was a shame not to see you there. We might have been introduced then Lady Murasaki," Will spoke with a mixture of charm, flattery and kowtowing that had worked handsomely with the officers in Baghdad. "I was unfortunately taken ill and had to leave before dinner was even served. I believe Hannibal, you suffered the same?"

"Quite," Hannibal agreed with a tight smile. "Perhaps something in one of the cocktails did not agree with me."

Murasaki's smile brightened at that and any concern pushed aside. "They are quite unusual. But I admit, I did get a taste for them at the Bloom's party. I hope when we have a gathering of our own, we might serve some, Hannibal? Though you should probably avoid them."

Both Will and Hannibal chuckled politely at Murasaki's pleasant jest, before, thankfully, they were interrupted by Sugden with a tea tray.

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After the niceties with Lady Murasaki, Hannibal led Will into his library where he very quietly asked Mrs Brown to join them.

Will wasn't keen on sneaking around in Hannibal's own home, but he did like that he had now been introduced as a friend and polite visits wouldn't seem amiss. With their clear difference in station, Hannibal wouldn't be so inconspicuous if visiting Will, that was for certain.

"You wished to see me, Sir." She addressed Hannibal but then immediately turned her sights on Will when she realised he was standing in the room also. "Apologies, am I interrupting-"

"No, no. Not at all, Mrs Brown." Hannibal reassured and then gestured to Will. "This is my friend Mr Graham. You might remember him, we fought in the war together but before that we were friends as boys. He grew up on the estate, his parents were--"

"Oh my goodness!" Realisation struck her and she held a hand to her cheek. "I see it now, look how you've grown. I remember you stopping by with your mother's jam. Our cook could never quite do as well."

She looked at him so fondly that Will couldn't help but smile.

"I'm glad to be remembered for that and not anything more rambunctious," Will smiled.

She chuckled at that and shook her head. "You were always a bright little boy. I'm certain any trouble you ever got into was not of your making." She shot Hannibal the sort of look that she probably had many times when he was a child. And at that Will laughed.

"Yes, well…" Hannibal grumbled good naturedly.

Will cleared his throat as they all fell silent.

"The thing is, Mrs Brown, I actually have a question for you. About my childhood." Will started and immediately her expression changed and her face grew a little pale.

"Yes, I suppose you do." She replied quietly, putting her hand on a shelf to steady herself.

"Here," Hannibal offered, pulling out a chair for her at the bureau.

"I shouldn't," she protested, but Hannibal shushed her and guided her to sit.

Realising he was now towering over her, Will crouched next to her and took one of her hands in his.

"My father, he passed recently. He left me a letter, and I'm sure you can guess what he revealed in it."

"I suspect I can." Mrs Brown replied, her voice quivering.

Will patted her hand. “I know it was many years ago, but I wondered if you could tell me who my birth parents are. If that was ever known to you.”

Will’s own voice cracked a little as a silent tear rolled down her cheek. She cupped his face in one hand and looked at him in such a motherly way that Will felt like a child again.

“I wish I could. It’s something I never had wished to know, it’s not my secret to keep. But now, for your sake, I wish I had known.” She sighed and pulled back her hand, using it to wipe away her tears. "What a terrible shock it must have been for you, and the loss of your father…"

“Is there nothing at all?” Hannibal asked, his glances between both Mrs Brown and Will were full of so much concern.

She shook her head.

“I can tell you all I remember, but I don’t think it will be much help.” She looked thoughtful for a moment and turned back to Will. “You couldn’t have been more than a week old. It was the middle of the night and the backdoor bell was rung. By the time any of us had wits about us to answer it, whoever had left you had gone. Of course, we couldn’t keep you, and telling the family or the authorities directly would have had you taken away and I… Well, that seemed a shame to me when I knew full well that Mr and Mrs Graham had been in want of a child for many years.”

She shook her head again, her expression thoughtful. “That’s really all there is to it. We fed you, I looked after you through the night, and in the morning I made a visit to your parents. To the Grahams.” She clarified the last. “I wish I could tell you more.”

Will nodded his understanding and thanks in one, patting her hand again. “I appreciate your candour.”

“Is there anyone else who might have more information?” Hannibal asked, gently.

Mrs Brown thought for a moment but then shook her head again. “I don’t see how, we were all there together, all the staff. No one saw who left the babe. Mr Sugden just thought it was someone trying their luck, wanting a sixth hungry mouth, or perhaps an out of wedlock mistake to be adopted by a great family.” She rolled her eyes at that and then looked apologetically at Will in case her words had hurt him.

“You don’t agree?” Hannibal asked. Will shared a look with him and they both had clearly had the same thought. That with nothing else to go on, that truly was the most likely scenario and possibly gave them a little lead on the sort of family they might be looking for, presumably local enough to the estate.

But then Mrs Brown shook her head.

“I don’t think so. I think it was someone who knew the family well enough to know that Master Hannibal was taking a bottle. I mean, you, your lordship.”

“What difference does that-” Hannibal started but then realisation dawned on his face.

“What?” Will asked.

“You see, when master Hannibal was a little over a year old, her ladyship was ill. She um, I hope she forgives me for saying - god rest her soul. It resulted in her not being able to produce milk. Master Hannibal was by this time three and eating solids, but a with many children he still had a healthy appetite for milk a couple of times a day, or before bed. And so he was given a bottle.”

“And so when a baby was delivered to your doorstep, you were able to give him one also.” Hannibal finished.

She nodded, “yes, exactly. If that baby had gone elsewhere, they’d have likely had to take it to the hospital or find a nursemaid. I could be wrong I suppose, it might be as Mr Sugden says, because of course they could have just left the baby on the doorstep of a hospital.”

Will nodded, feeling as though that possible breakthrough might not be at all.

“It was just such a coincidence, I suppose. That’s why it stuck in my mind.”

“Coincidence?” Will asked.

She turned to look at Hannibal, “if you don’t mind my saying so sir, you could be a frightfully demanding toddler. Although you mother saw no shame in it, it wasn’t really possible for it to be a secret that nanny would give you a bottle. You were cooed over by so many of the families that your parents dined with and I suppose that always struck me. How common knowledge it was, how accepted. No one batted an eye when the young master would stamp his foot for his bottle.”

Will looked at Hannibal’s whose cheeks had pinked slightly.

“So,” Will drew her attention as he looked back at her. “Because Hannibal’s situation was so well known, it seemed obvious that was the reason why someone would leave a baby on your doorstep?”

“When you say it like that… Though, I suppose it makes as much sense as them wanting their child to be adopted by his lordship.”

“Yes, if that were the case they clearly didn’t know my father,” Hannibal rumbled.

Mrs Brown’s mouth became a thin line and Will said nothing. Hannibal’s father had always seemed a fair man to him, but he was also man with something to prove, a lineage to protect. He most definitely would not have raised someone else’s child as his own, and, looking up at Hannibal’s wonderful face, Will couldn’t be happier about that. How different this would all be if they had been raised as brothers.

“Thank you, Mrs Brown.” Will said, getting back to his feet. “I do appreciate this so much.”

He took her hand and helped her up as she smiled at him.

“It’s just a pleasure to see you grown,” she replied. “And I hope that now you have made each other acquaintance again, you won’t be a stranger around here, Mr Graham.”

Will nodded with a smile and Hannibal cleared his throat at her impertinence but said nothing more. A glance passed between the lord and his housekeeper, just a moment that spoke of her adoration for him and hope that he would have friends and not keep his own company so much.

Will felt much the same.

*

“Hannibal,” Murasaki called out to him just as he and Will stood by the front door. Sugden was that moment handing Will his coat and hat, but all three of them paused and turned to her ladyship.

“Aunt?”

She came closer, but slowed her steps, suddenly looking less determined.

“You know, I was just about to suggest something, but I don’t know whether it would be impertinent.”

“Perhaps I should leave?” Will offered.

“No, Mr Graham, this concerns you.” Murasaki objected but then smiled. “I had something of an idea, though perhaps you can be the judge of whether it is a good one.”

Hannibal’s brows knit. He was very good at schooling his expression, it served him awfully well at poker. But even so, his palms were a little sweaty as he waited for what she might say that could concern Will. Had they given themselves away somehow?

“I think you’d agree Hannibal, that it has been too long since one of us visited the estate. In fact, I’d say a visit is overdue. And I wondered if it might be a good idea if Mr Graham went too?”

“Me?” Will asked, his eyes seeking Hannibal’s. He looked at him for a moment before turning back to his aunt.

“Forgive me, it is impertinent. I just… I think we are all very aware that there are some ill feelings harboured on the estate, and perhaps having one of their own as a… buffer of sorts, could make things easier. Put them a little at ease?”

Hannibal instantly loved the idea, and loved his aunt all the more for having it. A trip away, just he and Will? It was something neither of them might have dreamed of. And so, he remained completely tight-lipped and stoic.

“I… I understand what you’re proposing Lady Murasaki, but-” Will began to haltingly reply but she cut him off.

“We would of course compensate you. You would no doubt have to miss a few days work and at the least we must cover that, and any expenses.” She turned to Hannibal then, as though this was a done deal. “Hannibal, you must write to Mr Graham’s employers to explain your need of him, I am sure they would be willing to release him for a few days if you did.”

“I… Yes, of course I could do that.” Hannibal replied, trying not to stutter over the words. Trying not to smile, or let his heart burst.

“Wonderful,” Murasaki smiled at them both and clasped her hands together. “I will leave you to arrange the particulars.”

Hannibal nodded and there were another round of goodbyes, before Will finally stepped outside, Hannibal following him onto the steps.

“I’ll… I’ll write. And arrange something. And book a train.” Hannibal said, his mind going a mile a minute and his heart thundering just as quick.

He loved the strained look on Will’s face that gave away his desperate attempt not to smile, not to be as gleeful as Hannibal knew he was.

Will inclined his head, a hand to his hat to say goodbye, but instead of those words he said quietly, “please, make it soon.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal arrive at the Lecter Estate and are alone, for now.

June, 1920. Lecter Estate.

“Hannibal, Hannibal…” Will groaned his name as their bodies clung tightly to each other.

They had arrived that evening after two trains and a coach ride had brought them to the locked up house. Really, they should have stayed at the inn in the town for the evening, at least until they were able to get some temporary help to air out the place.

But it hadn’t been within either of their power to deny themselves this for another moment.

Instead they had found their way to Hannibal’s old suite, ripped the dust coverings from the bed and made love for the first time in years.

It was frenzied and desperate and Hannibal wasn’t sure it could really be classed as making love in the strictest sense, but it was what they both needed.

“Will,” Hannibal gasped his name against Will’s throat, panting against the sweat pooling in the dip by his throat. He pushed deeper, their bodies rocking together, utter bliss for them both.

Hannibal had spent less time than he knew he should have slicking Will’s hole, but Will was relaxed enough to take him and what had started as gentle but urgent was now frantic.

“I love you,” Hannibal panted, and Will could feel the wetness of his tears. Hannibal was crying, even as he fucked hard and deep into Will like his life depended on doing so.

Will dug his fingers into Hannibal’s back, his nails biting into skin as he hiked his legs up further, letting Hannibal go deeper.

“Please,” he begged, though he had no idea what he was begging for. Just this, just more, just everything and forever.

“Will,” Hannibal moaned, his teeth along Will’s shoulder now. Biting though not hard, as though he was compelled to do so, to consume Will as wholly as he possibly could. And Will wanted that too.

As Hannibal rocked each hard and deep thrust within him, Will pushed his hand between them and took hold of his own aching cock. The first stroke was almost painful, but then

frenzied as he felt his climax edging closer and closer.

“Hannibal, my Hannibal…” Will breathed out the words as Hannibal continued to nip at his skin. He felt Hannibal tremble, heard him grunt as he started to tighten around him with each stroke.

“I’m close,” Hannibal warned, “going to fill you, Will. Mark you as mine from the inside out.” The words were stilted as he struggled them out through each hard thrust.

Will could feel how much effort it was taking for Hannibal to keep fucking him so deep, with Will’s body starting to hold him in, ready to milk him.

And those words, those possessive words, were all Will needed. His throbbing cock jumped in his hand and suddenly he was coming. His whole body shook with the sudden strength of it.

Will cried out and spilled between them, releasing his cock immediately as it grew oversensitive in a way he’d rarely experienced. He felt his muscles clenching and pulsing, feeling every inch of Hannibal’s hardness inside him.

Hannibal groaned and fucked into him twice more, his forehead against Will’s shoulder as he felt the wet warmth within him as Hannibal filled him as promised.

They both continued to shudder and pant, their bodies were like live wires, and Will found himself bizarrely thinking of how this energy flowed through their veins like electricity through cables and wires and into the lights. He was lit up. He was on fire.

He was crying, he realised. Silent tears streaming as Hannibal, still half hard and throbbing inside him, clung to him all the tighter. They wrapped their bodies together and shook.

“I needed this, I need you.” Will muttered words that he struggled to say. A truth that was hard to acknowledge knowing that this wasn’t possible, this would always just be furtive liaisons as they were expected to go about their lives and do as society dictated.

As though reading his mind Hannibal replied, “you’re mine Will. I’m yours. Nothing will ever change that.”

“I love you,” Will finally gasped out the words as the tears continued to flow.

“I know, my darling Will. I know.”

*

Hannibal woke feeling warm and complete for the first time in so many years that it made his heart ache. It was so strange to think of that bizarre juxtaposition of their days in the trenches. Of the horrors of war, but the satisfaction and completeness he felt from spending his days and nights with Will to whatever degree they could manage.

He and Will lay naked in Hannibal’s bed. And whilst he knew they had spent some of the night wrapped together, there was something so pleasing about finding himself on his side

facing Will as Will instead lay on his back, his limbs spread out and one arm above him on the pillow. So perfectly relaxed and at peace. He looked as content as Hannibal felt.

He wanted to draw him, or compose a piece of music at his piano. Both things he was no longer able to do and yet, having Will beside him eased that loss in some way.

It made Hannibal's heart swell.

They had been desperate the night before and he had taken Will hard but lovingly. And now all he wanted to do was worship him for the rest of their lives. He was determined that he would find a way to do that. No matter what, and no matter how Will saw the practicalities of the situation, he would find a way for them to have this forever even if it took years to get there.

Will's gentle snoring levelled out and instead he was just breathing deeply, nearer to waking.

The sheet barely covered up to Will's waist and the growing hardness there was unmistakable as his body did as male bodies do in the early hours.

Hannibal ran his tongue out over his lips before sucking the lower one into his mouth. Will was magnificent. A body hardened by labour then war, a few small scars here and there from both that only made him look all the more beautiful rather than broken.

A strange thought, Hannibal realised when he considered his own arm. How it made him feel about himself and yet how it would be nothing more than a sign of fortitude in his lover if their roles were reversed.

Hannibal released a sigh and moved his good hand to Will's chest, stroking it down until it slipped over the sheets and his hard length. Will stirred slightly and temptation grew so large that Hannibal was unable to ignore it.

He removed his hand and then manoeuvred himself on the bed, crawling over Will and between his legs. As dawn broke through the curtains Hannibal gently pulled down the sheet and took Will into his mouth.

"Oh god," Will's back arched, immediately awake and pushing his cock deeper into Hannibal's mouth, where he sucked with vigour.

As Will's hands snaked into his hair, gripping it at the root, they heard the sound of chimes. Someone was at the door.

They both stilled and Hannibal drew back, Will falling from his mouth with a slight pop.

"Who…" Will started, as bewildered as Hannibal himself.

"The last time someone called this early it was a census taker."

"Wrong time of year," Will commented a moment before the bell chimed again.

“I have to answer, there are no servants.” Hannibal decided aloud, as he got up from the bed and reached for a robe. He didn’t miss Will’s smirk at Hannibal answering the door in something that was practically indecent. Especially in these countryside places that seemed so far removed from the modernity of the metropolis.

He left Will in the bed and made his way down the main, grand staircase, the slap of his feet on the hardwood floor echoing around the lobby and then to the front hall just as the chime sounded again.

Hannibal unlocked and pulled open the great door.

“Hello?”

Outside stood two women and a man with cap in hand. The first woman stood on the top step, having evidently been the one ringing the bell, and the other stood on the pathway.

“Begging your pardon, m’lord,” the woman muttered, her cheeks heating at his attire as she looked away and curtsied. “My name is Louise Hobbs, we were engaged by Mr Sugden. We did try the servant’s entrance first just in case, but he did say that you have come only with a land agent.”

A land agent, there was a thought. Hannibal cocked a brow at that but made no response to correct the description and not entirely sure it was wholly incorrect for this trip.

“Yes, we’re here to survey the property and didn’t feel the need to engage any help, but it seems Mr Sugden has thought of everything.” Hannibal tried to keep his tone friendly despite his frustration.

“We won’t be in the way, sir.” The woman continued. “He explained that you’re a modern sort of fellow and won’t be needing a valet, and that you’re not expecting any visitors and so no need for a butler or household. Myself and Abigail are here to turn down the house, air everything out and replace the coverings. We’ve done it before for her ladyship so we know what we’re about. We’ll also make you and your guest your meals and wait on you if you wish it. There will be groceries delivered in an hour or so. And Mr Hobbs here, he is the chimney man, he’ll be checking them but doubtful they will need cleaning as they’ve not been in use. We won’t be any bother to you, sir. Mr Sugden has engaged us 7am to 7pm, but if you have need of us for longer or wish us to stay in servants quarters then that can be arranged.”

Hannibal let the woman finish her half prepared speech before he finally nodded.

“Sugden really did think of everything. Well, I suppose you should come in then.” He stood back and held open the door, leaving all three servants to stand staring at him with mixed expressions of shock and confusion. “As Mr Sugden said, I am a modern sort of man, and I’m getting quite chilly in this robe, so I’d prefer you go through here than have me come meet you at the servant’s entrance.”

Abigail started forwards but the woman stopped her and shook her head, “the path was wet, sir. Our boots are soiled.”

Hannibal shook his head dismissively, “I guarantee you I saw worse things at war than a few muddy footprints in a hall and was quite able to cope.” He lifted the corner of his mouth in a half smile so that they knew that he meant some levity.

But all the same Hannibal turned and started back up the stairs, calling back over his shoulder, “my guest and I will be down shortly. Please start downstairs and leave my suite, the guest suite and the library until my guest and I leave.”

He heard the murmurs of agreement as he continued up.

*

Will had freshened up and dressed in cheap tweeds by the time Hannibal returned from downstairs. He watched Hannibal enter the room and immediately discard his robe, letting it slide from him and to the floor as he strode towards Will and wrapped his good arm around his neck.

The kiss was immediate and intense. Will quickly regretted having gotten dressed, but then that brought him back to the reality of the situation. He pulled back from the kiss.

“Visitors?”

“Sugden arranged for some day help, mostly to air out the house but they’ll also see to us for food. They won’t disturb us up here.”

Will tensed and took a step back, Hannibal’s arm dropping from him and resting as listlessly as the other.

“Not with people here, sorry Hannibal. I can’t.” The words made his throat sore, already aching with sadness and regret. He knew this bliss couldn’t last, but had hoped it wouldn’t be over quite so soon.

“They won’t bother us, I’ve asked them not to interfere with this room or your supposed guest suite. Nor the library as that is where we will need to start on the actual work we are here to do-”

Will went to cut him off to say that even so, it was not something he could do. But Hannibal held up a hand and continued.

“They will be gone at seven every evening and return at seven in the morning. For those twelve hours you will truly be my beloved.”

Will thought about it for a moment before giving a nod. That would do, it would have to. As this always would be. A stolen life in and around their real one. Or a real life stuffed in the cracks of the fake one.

“I should get dressed,” Hannibal said finally, and Will nodded with a blush.

“Yes, you probably should.”

*

The Hobbs family, as it turned out they were, were unobtrusive and went about their business admirably as far as Will could tell. It was clear that they had done this before - they knew where to find everything and exactly how Hannibal's aunt appeared to like things done.

Hannibal was happy to leave them to it, uninterested in the house and the estate as far as Will could tell. And whilst he understood why, it was all part of the problem.

"Perhaps you should sell," Will murmured as they spread out the estate plans on the large library table.

Hannibal looked up at him, brows raised.

"It's clear you have no sense of connection to the place, it might be better for the residents to have a new lord rather than an absent one."

There was total silence as Hannibal studied Will for a moment and Will wondered if he'd overstepped.

"I… don't know how to respond." Hannibal finally admitted. He looked down at the plans and let out a sigh. "With my parents gone, with you gone, there was nothing here for me and yet I found myself lord of it. And of the mess that came with it, the trouble my uncle had wrought."

"You can't blame yourself, Hannibal." Will replied, softly.

"I don't, not anymore. You were right when you told me there is nothing I could have done. I was at war."

"You wouldn't be alone. I've read in the papers, many families are selling up. The cost of keeping houses like this running now, after the war and the changes it has brought, it can be impossible. Look at me, I might have been one of your farmers. There are others like me, or who might have gone into service, but the war changed our prospects. Perhaps not necessarily better or worse, but different from that of our parents. The paths we'd been given to follow, with generations behind us, have now forked and twisted and lead to other places."

"What would I do?" Hannibal asked, "what would *we* do?"

"We? Hannibal, we don't do anything. We can't, you know that." Will tried not to choke on the words.

Hannibal shook his head. "No, I don't accept that. You've seen what we can have, at Freddie's club, and here, last night."

"That's not real life," Will sighed.

Silence settled over both of them, and whilst there was anger there it truly wasn't at each other. Hannibal moved around the table and put a hand on Will's shoulder.

“Enough of this. For now, this is our life. Until we return to London the evenings are our own. Alright?”

Will felt a heady mixture of joy and sorrow, but nodded all the same.

“Now, if that is settled for now. There is someone I wanted you to meet whilst we are here. I believe he should be checking in at the inn around noon, so we will go to the inn and wait.”

“Who?” Will asked with some trepidation as Hannibal let go of his shoulder and went back to the estate plans.

“An enquiry agent named Zeller. He’s going to help us find your birth family.”

Will swallowed, feeling the blood drain from his face. He knew this trip might become an emotional whirlwind, but the reality of it suddenly felt heavy upon his heart.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Will begins to uncover the truth about his family.

The coach was delayed and so Will and Hannibal dined alone at the inn, though Hannibal couldn't take as much pleasure in it as he'd wish. Of course he enjoyed any time spent with Will, but he longed for them to be alone together again as they had the previous night.

Perhaps Will wished the same, though Hannibal was sure as they sat and ate in dour silence, that wasn't the only reason Will seemed pensive.

"If you'd rather not know-" Hannibal started, keeping his voice low.

Will shook his head.

"It's not that. I would… I want to know where I came from. It's just a lot." Will was equally as quiet, he sounded so small that Hannibal wanted to wrap him in his arms.

At that moment, perhaps thankfully, the server came and took their plates away. The moment was broken and they spoke only of meeting with the farmers on the estate over the next few days until finally a shadow fell over them.

"My lord," Zeller stood at the side of the table, removing his hat and bowing his head as Hannibal and Will stood.

"Mr Zeller, it is good to see you again." Hannibal smiled his welcome and held out a hand to shake. Once they had all shook hands and been introduced they sat back down, Zeller taking a chair at the end of the table.

"I took the liberty of looking into the information you passed on from your meeting with Mrs Brown," Zeller told Hannibal, and he did not miss Will's glance at him. He had passed the information onto Zeller without troubling Will, and knew now that might be an error.

Zeller continued and if he had noticed the glance he said nothing of it.

"I have been here a few times since you engaged me with this task and have found nothing to counter Mrs Brown's account. Unfortunately, that also means that I have been unable to go any further down the line of enquiry regarding the baby being left at the house. There were no witnesses I was able to uncover to it, or even to anything of note or suspicion. And the accounts of the few servants I was able to locate corroborate Mrs Brown's story. Which we already knew and only begins at the finding of the child on the doorstep."

“There are no other leads?” Hannibal asked, one eye cast on Will to gauge his reactions.

“None on that side of things,” Zeller agreed. “But I did start looking into some of the thoughts Mrs Brown had about where the baby might have come from. First of all, I have checked the registers from here and all surrounding towns within twenty miles. There were no births registered at the time that would have accounted for the child. Now, allowing that record keeping isn’t always perfect, either the records were lost or the baby was not registered. A secret birth.”

There was something in Zeller’s eyes that made Hannibal glad he had hired him. A hunger there for a mystery to solve, a passion for this work beyond his payment - which was ample enough to ensure the work was indeed done. Perhaps Will saw it too for he seemed to bristle, and Hannibal understood why. This might be a fine mystery to Zeller, but it was in fact Will’s life.

“You’ve told us a lot of what you don’t know, but is there anything you do know?” Will asked curtly.

Zeller turned his attention to Will and raised a brow. Hannibal saw no love lost between them as Zeller smirked.

“I know plenty. A negative tells us as much as a positive. If the baby wasn’t registered it adds more weight to the idea that this baby was the result of a secret affair.”

Will reeled back at that response and looked indignant.

“How did you make that leap?” He asked, “it is just as likely to have been a farmer or servant who had too many mouths to feed.”

Zeller smiled and nodded, “Quite so. But, here’s the other negative. No one recalls anyone having been pregnant or having a baby around that time. And having a baby in secret is almost impossible for a servant or a farmer’s wife. With duties and responsibilities they can hardly lock themselves away.”

“And is it fair to say that you have enquired reasonably enough on that front?” Hannibal asked.

Zeller turned back to him and gave a curt nod, “Yes my lord. I interviewed a good many people in this town to verify this information. There was no baby born around that time that can’t otherwise be accounted for.”

Silence fell over the table then and Hannibal looked at Will, who sat in contemplation.

“What now?” Will finally asked. But it was Hannibal that Zeller looked at as he answered.

“It’s up to you, sir. I think the best line of enquiry now would be into the landed families around here or any visiting them at the time. I can be discreet, but it will start to cost. Servants are the best bet, and even the most loyal will talk, for the right price.”

“You want us to pay for your bribes,” Will surmised.

“Yes,” Zeller answered pointedly. “I will need to have money for their compensation. Any servant willing to speak on such a subject is risking their livelihood, we can only expect them to do so for a price.”

Hannibal nodded and Will begrudgingly followed suit.

“Fine,” Hannibal replied and pulled out his cheque book. “I shall give you an advance to cover the compensation, and you must contact me if there is a need for any more.”

He scribbled on the paper and then handed it to Zeller.

This concluded their business for now and Zeller took his leave.

“I don’t know if I like him,” Will muttered once the man had gone.

Hannibal let out a light chuckle, “I got that impression. And you don’t need to like him for him to be able to do his job.”

Will grumbled unintelligibly but said no more about it.

*

They took a leisurely trip back to the house and then had an early dinner made up by Mrs Hobbs.

By the time they were done with it, the Hobbs family were packing up for the day and bidding them farewell.

As soon as the door closed Will visibly relaxed and Hannibal placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright?” He asked gently.

Will relaxed further, sinking against Hannibal until Hannibal wrapped his good arm around him.

“It was a lot. It is a lot. To think about, I mean. I don’t like not knowing who I am.” Will’s words were barely more than a whisper.

“You know who you are, Will. Whatever and whoever your family turns out to be, nothing will change that. And, for what it’s worth, I’m sure you know that nothing will change my regard for you.”

Will’s smile was weak but it was there.

“When we go to bed will you just hold me?” Will asked, to which Hannibal shook his head dismissing that he had any other ideas.

“I know our time together in this way is limited, for now, but that doesn’t mean I must ravage you every moment we are alone.” Hannibal teased.

That drew a smile from Will who settled against Hannibal all the more.

“This is limited too. Not just sex, this intimacy. Selfishly, or stupidly, I want as much of it as I can get before we are no longer able to take these liberties.” Will murmured the words into Hannibal’s shoulder.

*

The next morning, Will woke feeling somehow both rested and weary. They’d managed a good night’s sleep even with their bodies tangled together, producing an almost suffocating heat.

But the previous day had been draining, the emotions of it all weighed on him, and not for the first time he wondered if he should just forget the whole thing and let it lie. His parents had been good people and had raised him well, that should suffice.

Hannibal stirred and then moved, his body stretching out a little before curling around Will. His good arm draped over Will’s side as he pressed to Will’s back.

Will could feel Hannibal’s morning arousal and it felt strangely grounding. It felt so normal and mundane that they could share this, even if for this short time. The thought brought an immediate melancholy that Will tried to school himself out of. It was his tendency, he knew, to look to the practical side of things and to be realistic. Whereas Hannibal, born into such wealth, saw very few problems in life, even the very real obstacles.

Will wanted to believe, as Hannibal did, that one day they would have this together for real, forever. But it simply wasn’t in his make up to accept something that seemed so wholly unrealistic and fanciful.

He shuddered as Hannibal moved against him in his sleep, pulling Will closer until his cock pressed against Will’s ass.

It was still early, the sun barely coming through the curtains, but the Hobbs family would arrive soon. Perhaps until they did, Will could just pretend that everything Hannibal said would really come to pass and that they could have this everyday at some point, in some happy future.

Will reached behind him and into Hannibal’s pyjama pants, took him in hand, starting a slow stroke that barely earned him a murmur. Then there was a gasp and Hannibal’s mouth fell upon his shoulder. Will continued to stroke as Hannibal kissed and nipped at his shoulder, their bodies writhing together until Hannibal’s good hand reached down and began to reciprocate.

They were both panting and moaning as they worked each other desperately. And Will had to believe, had to let himself believe even if just for this moment, that one day they could do this leisurely. There would be no barriers, no time constraints. No sneaking around and getting off before the servants arrived. They would have this.

Will came as soon as he felt Hannibal's hot release against his lower back, both of them trembling through the aftershocks of their climaxes. They both struggled to even out their breathing as, ignoring the mess completely, they wrapped themselves up in each other and breathed as one.

Only a few minutes now until they were parted again for the day. Only a few minutes, but Will would take them.

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Time wouldn't be idly spent. Hannibal and Will were going to visit the families on the estate today, those that still remained. Their purpose was dual - Hannibal needed to understand the plight and circumstances they faced in order to inform his decision on what to do with the estate in the long run. And Will needed to uncover any information they might have about his birth family that they could pass to Hannibal's man.

The stroll over the estate was pleasant, but the pleasantness ended with their first visit. Mr Anderson had a lot to say to Hannibal about the way things were on the estate, but he was sympathetic that Hannibal had not been the cause of their woes. Even so, Hannibal was the first to accept that it was his responsibility to resolve them.

By the third farm, Hannibal had a much clearer picture of those responsibilities and that he was already too late to make any difference. The remaining farmers were the ones who had faired adequately under his uncle, the others were no longer around to be helped. There was a finality in that that felt strangely freeing.

He could either return to occupy the house or he could sell the estate with the appropriate clauses for the tenants, and it would affect them little either way now. It was those who had lost their farms he needed recompense. And that was something he resolved to do - another job for Zeller. He would track down and compensate all those families as best he could. Even Will, in lieu of his parents, as much as he'd resist.

Will was fairing no better. As they took tea with the tenants, he was able to politely turn the conversation but none had heard of anything further than they had already found. Just speculation and gossip, though most knew nothing at all.

Until the sixth farm.

The woman who answered the door was very pleased to see them both, and though neither of them quite remembered her as she was around ten years older than Hannibal, she had grown up around the estate had begun training as a scullery maid at the house before her mother had died and she had moved back to her father's farm to help him. She had fond memories of seeing them both scamper around and Hannibal did then finally strike a memory of her playfully chasing him from a room once when he was all about adventuring and she was trying to do her job.

They sat and drank another cup of tea with Angela Budish and her father.

Her father was old and Angela told them that she was soon to marry, another local farmer, and move to his farm, and her father was set to come with her and they would relinquish this farm back to the estate.

“So you need not worry about us on that account, my lord.” She said with a gentle smile, and a clear concern there that Hannibal really ought not fret over it.

“I’m glad to hear it, and congratulations on your wedding. I hope it will be a fine and blessed day,” Hannibal returned, at which she blushed slightly and inclined her head.

“Very kind of you,” she replied.

As a lull began and they sipped their tea, as had become practice at the previous houses, Will set down his cup and cleared his throat.

“There is another matter I would like to ask you about,” He began, two sets of curious eyes turning to him. “Do you know anything of the baby that was left at the Lecter House some years ago, when his Lordship was a small child, a toddler?”

The old man’s brows knit together as he considered the question then shook his head.

“I can’t say it’s something I’ve ever been aware of. Though, I’ve always been too occupied with my farm for gossip. My wife might have been able to help,” his words drifted off and Will gave a reassuring smile as he nodded.

But neither of them missed that Angela Budish had turned a little pale.

“This would have been not long before mother died,” she said quietly to her father. “Before I came back to the farm.”

“That so?” Her father asked, then shook his head. “I can barely recall last week,” he chuckled, which the three younger people indulged before silence resumed, heavy and strained.

When the tea was finished and all pleasant chat of the weather exhausted, Hannibal and Will took their leave. But as they reached the gate to the farm Angela trotted up behind them.

“M’lord,” she started, standing stock still as they both turned back to acknowledge her. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of my father. It’s been so long but… it was never for me to tell and so I never did.”

“Tell what?” Will asked, barely concealing his anxious eagerness.

She turned her full attention to Will then and Hannibal was sure that she knew Wil was the baby in question, the sympathy etched on her expression said as much.

“You have to understand that it was so long before that I didn’t connect it until the baby was safe and loved in a new family and then it didn’t feel right that I should say something.”

Hannibal saw Will's jaw tighten, but he was patient and waited for her to continue unpestered.

"I worked at the big house for just over a year. When I had been in service perhaps two months, one of the other scullery maids was taken sick and I had to fill in for her, making up the fires in the guest rooms before the house woke. I wouldn't have usually done it alone back then, not whilst still training you understand, but there was a desperate need as the house was full of guests for a party. I was to prepare the fires for two of the young ladies that were staying, a little older than me, daughters of one of the noblemen I think. Mrs Brown felt they would likely be less fastidious in their youth to notice if I didn't make the fire to the usual standard."

Hannibal nodded his understanding.

"The youngest was a little older than myself. I was thirteen at the time, she was seventeen and very sweet. Every morning when I went in she was already awake and excited to get up and do some activity. The families were all staying the week or more and there were all sorts of activities planned for the ladies and the gentlemen. So I didn't think much of it other than her being an understandably excited young lady. I'd have been excited too with horseback riding and picnics."

Angela took a breath and wrung her hands, her expression pensive as she tried to find the words.

"It might have been nothing, or it might just be coincidence and my mind has made up fanciful stories. But you see, sirs, it was more than just the excitement about the party. She spoke about loving to come to these parts as she was fond of a young man in the area."

"Did she say who?" Hannibal asked, curious as to where this was going.

Angela shook her head, "never aloud, but there was just something… the only young man I could think of locally was Sir Reginald's younger brother, he was Sir Reginald's ward and the only man of land and family in the area that I might call young. And the night after the big ball when I went to make up her fire she was crying. It looked like she hadn't slept for the night and I called in her ladies maid. The whole family left later that day. And… I can't say for sure, but I think it was around nine months later that the baby was left."

Silence hung between them all then until finally Angela broke it with a curtsy and some polite words of goodbye as though she had said nothing at all on the subject.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal must entertain an unexpected visitor.

When they returned to the house Will was a little shaken.

He hadn't expected to find someone with so much information. And although it might all just be gossip and conjecture, it was worth investigating as another line of enquiry.

Could it be a coincidence? Or could he be the product of a secret assignation between the young daughter of a nobleman and Sir Reginald's brother?

The thought made him gag. To think that, if it were true, he'd been working all that time alongside his own uncle and not known it. He felt even more wan at the next idea that presented itself - had Sir Reginald known? Was it that and not his connection to Hannibal that had earned him his place as Sir Reginald's man?

"Will, you've gone quite pale, are you alright?" Hannibal asked him softly as they stood in the hallway, removing their own hats and coats in lieu of staff present.

"I don't know," Will answered honestly.

Before either of them could say another word Mrs Hobbs appeared.

"Oh, sirs. Let me hang your coats," she hastened to take them from them. "If you plan to stay longer I should insist that Mr Sugden join you, or else send for staff. If you don't mind my saying so, it's not right for you to have to do for yourselves like this, my lord."

"We managed quite well at war, Mrs Hobbs," Hannibal reminded her of his previous words, but these were much colder, "no one to hang our coats in the trenches."

Mrs Hobbs went red in the face and began to murmur an apology for being impertinent.

But Hannibal cut her off with a shake of his head, "no, no. Forgive me. It has been a long day and I'm tired. I should not have spoken to you like that. We are perfectly satisfied with the wonderful job you and your family do for us here. It is more than ample for this trip. But you're right, if we stay longer in future, we'll need more staff. I really do thank you for your concern."

She still looked a little upset, but that had gone some way to calm her and she smiled.

“Before I forget, sir. There is a note for you on the side there,” she nodded towards the sideboard. “One of the Bloom’s footmen brought it over while you were out.”

Will didn’t miss Hannibal’s sharp glance, nor the concern in his eyes. What cruel coincidence was this? Or had Sir Reginald got wind of all this and was trying to step in to handle it? Did this really mean that--

Hannibal’s words interrupted Will’s thoughts.

“I understood the family had moved to London.” He spoke to Mrs Hobbs but the softness in his eyes, the reassurance there, was for Will. It couldn’t be Sir Reginald, surely.

“That’s right, sir.” Mrs Hobbs confirmed, her demeanour slowly returning to normal now that they had moved beyond Hannibal’s harsh words. “Sir Reginald’s son has the estate now, he and his family.”

“Ah, you’re quite right. I recall the same now.” Hannibal smiled at her and the smile was returned.

Will had no doubt that Hannibal indeed had remembered this and wanted to ensure that Will had too before he became twisted in his thoughts.

“Thank you, Mrs Hobbs.” Hannibal said, in that way the upper classes had of dismissing someone. She smiled again and gave a half curtsy before moving off to hang their coats.

Hannibal picked up the letter and started towards the library, with Will duly following him.

It wasn’t until they reached the desk that Hannibal broke the seal and unfolded the letter. Will waited as he scanned over it, his eyes settling at the bottom of the note before returning to the top.

“It’s from Alana.” He said, his voice even.

Will blinked. He hadn’t expected that and it was likely fair to say that Hannibal hadn’t either.

“My Dear Hannibal,” Hannibal began reading. “How happy I was to hear that you are currently at the house. I am visiting my brother this month and it would be diverting to see you. Perhaps we can go riding, like old times? I will come visit you this evening for dinner and we can make our plans. If this is not convenient, please send a reply and if I hear nothing I shall take it as an acceptance. Your friend, Alana Bloom.”

“I would comment on how fast news has travelled that you are here, but I recall the rate at which these things work,” Will smirked.

Hannibal huffed a chuckle, “indeed. Mrs Hobbs ordered groceries, the shopkeeper tells his customers, one of which likely works for the Blooms, relayed then to the butler or a valet, or however it passed along to the family. I should imagine they were aware within less than twenty-four hours.”

They shared a smile and Will tried not to let his falter with those niggling thoughts he wanted to ignore for now. Nothing could ever be secret, they could never be anonymous.

“So, we’ll have company,” Will said instead.

“It seems so, I will go and ask Mrs Hobbs if she can make up an extra plate. I am sure Alana won’t mind roughing it with us. I have no doubt that the rumours also included the fact that we scandalously brought no staff with us.”

Will nodded as Hannibal walked off to find Mrs Hobbs. He picked up the letter where Hannibal had left it on the bureau and read it over. Alana’s fine lettering, the way it had seemed to linger over the word friend. The repetition of it.

They had grown up together, it wasn’t such a stretch to imagine that Hannibal and Alana’s friendship might be more. Had the war not happened, would their families have encouraged them? Pushed them? It could have been an ideal match. It could *be* an ideal match.

The thought made Will’s heart sink.

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Hannibal had insisted upon them wearing the best of the clothes they had brought with them for dinner. It seemed the least he could do given their basic circumstances. As it was, Mrs Hobbs had agreed to stay on and serve them, which Hannibal was glad of.

It wouldn’t be proper to have a young lady in the house with them and no other chaperone or staff in attendance.

When the car pulled up outside the three of them went out to welcome Alana, and Mrs Hobbs gave the driver instructions to pull around the back and have his own super in the servant’s quarters whilst the master dined above.

It was strangely jarring.

Hannibal and his aunt kept up formalities in their life in London, they had ample staff for their needs and entertained on occasion. But these few days had thrown him back into the trenches, those days of doing for themselves. And, whilst he’d had a valet of sorts including Will, and Jimmy before him, it was nothing like things had been before the war. He well remembered many of the other officers reminiscing and looking forward to the end of the war when things might go back to *normal*. Valets and balls, being gentlemen of no profession.

It was Will that made this mind set impossible for Hannibal. Despite the hell it had been, the war had allowed he and Will that short time together in the trenches. To discreetly live as lovers might.

He realised he was guilty of the same rosy nostalgia now, looking back upon those days as if they’d been perfect. As if they hadn’t been in fear for both their lives and of discovery. But, in retrospect, it had perhaps been worth it.

Mrs Hobbs took Alana's long, light coat, before Hannibal guided her by hand into the library and bid her take a seat on one of the sofas in front of the fireplace. Once she had, both he and Will sat on the sofa opposite her, a modest distance apart.

"Apologies, my dear. As we're only here on business and for a very short time, we decided not to open up the house so we are limited in our entertainment. Though Mrs Hobbs has prepared the small dining room for dinner."

"Please," Alana protested with a beautiful and joyful smile. "I should apologise, springing myself upon you like this. But when Arden told me you were in residence it seemed rude to not make contact. Besides… whilst I love children, being in a house of three under the age of five for the last week has been… an experience."

They all chuckled politely.

"Well, then I'm pleased we could offer some adult company." Hannibal replied fondly. She really was a splendid young woman, and the fact was, this felt like an approval of sorts.

It was clear from the dinner at her father's London home that Alana knew what Will meant to Hannibal, and she might guess from him being here that those feelings were returned. And whilst he had been sure she wouldn't spread it like so much gossip amongst their peers, she would be in her rights to shun his company.

"And I'm so pleased to see you again, Will." Alana's smile was wide and although Will did his best to return it, Hannibal could see what that took from him. He'd had only hours to allow for the idea that he and Alana might be kin, if the gossip was true. Hannibal could only imagine how ill-settled he felt.

"The pleasure is mine," Will replied, easing into his usual gruff charm. "I still regret not being able to stay at your dinner--"

Alana waved her hand to dismiss his apology, "nonsense. I understand completely, it was overwhelming. But father still remembers you very fondly. He speaks of you on occasion, and I'm sure he'd enjoy a visit sometime, something less formal."

Will smiled and gave a nod, though Hannibal didn't miss how he'd paled a little.

"I will make arrangements when we return to London," Will replied.

"Do," Alana encouraged. And then a silence fell over them, conversation hard to come by when there seemed to be something hanging between them.

Hannibal caught Alana's eye as she looked between he and Will, appraising. Finally she spoke again.

"And I was so glad that the two of you located each other after losing touch. It is good to see that some bonds broken by the war could be mended."

Will took in a deep breath but said nothing and Hannibal was unsure how to reply to such a statement. If spoken by anyone else it would have been an easy conversation about

friendship, but Alana knew and so the words felt heavy with meaning.

They were saved by Mrs Hobbs coming to tell them that dinner was ready to be served, and so they repaired to the small dining room in polite silence.

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Dinner passed quickly and with easy conversation.

They decided quickly that, whilst it was lovely to see each other, they would not go riding. Hannibal explained they still had much to do around the estate before returning to London, but that at the very first opportunity, he would call on her there.

Having not fully had the chance before, the three of them then caught each other up on what they had been doing since the war ended. Alana cried boredom at having to return to her state as her father's daughter, but was pleased at least to be in London. Will explained his job and Alana enthused again that her father would love to hear this from him too.

Hannibal's tale was longer, explaining in very scarce detail being invalided home and then the death of his uncle. It was all matter-of-fact, never anything someone could turn into salacious gossip, as much as he trusted Alana. And now he caught her up to their being on the estate to interview the farmers and better allow Hannibal to decide what to do with it.

"Well, I will admit to being selfish and hope you stay in London," Alana smiled over her dessert. "I think almost everyone I know with an ounce of common sense is married now and busy with that sort of life. Which of course, makes me question if they had as much common sense as I had assumed."

That made Hannibal chuckle, and though Will smiled he was clearly not as amused. Perhaps the day weighed on him, or the talk of marriage. It might just be entertaining in general, especially as last minute as it was. This was a life not meant for Will Graham, and had he been born to it, Hannibal was sure he'd have still detested it. He'd have been one of those wild children who took off in the footsteps of the grand tour and never returned. He'd become a bohemian or turn native amongst the Arabs much to the chagrin of his family. He would not hold balls and make idle, polite conversation about nothing of any value.

And Hannibal loved him so very much for that.

As they finished up dinner and took coffee in the library, Will hesitated to join them.

He lingered near the door as Hannibal and Alana sat.

"I'm sorry, do you mind if I excuse myself?" Will asked, polite and with real apology. "I'm quite tired and don't think I'd be very good company."

"Of course!" Alana replied quickly, standing to go to him. "I'm sure I've quite worn you all out, especially when you're so busy. Go and rest and I hope you will pay a visit when you have a chance."

Will smiled, it was tight and he looked pale, but he nodded and took Alana's hand, shaking it softly before taking his leave.

When Alana turned back to him, Hannibal tried to hide his concern. Will was suffering, that much was clear, and he wished he could go to him.

Perhaps Alana read that in his face for she didn't sit back down but instead said, "I'm feeling quite full and sleepy, would you mind if we took a quick turn in the rose garden before I leave? I don't want to fall asleep in the car." She chuckled.

Hannibal nodded and they went to the hallway, he helped Alana into her coat and then rang for Mrs Hobbs, asking her to have the driver make ready to leave as soon as Miss Bloom wished.

They went back through the library then and took the doors there that opened out onto the patio before taking the steps down into the rose garden. It was only when they were a little way from the house that Alana linked her arm with Hannibal's good one and spoke in a low tone.

"Have I upset Will, do you think?" Her words were laced with true concern.

Hannibal stopped and looked down at her, shaking his head.

"No, it truly has been a long day. And it has been quite taxing for Will." He let the words hang, allowing her to make her own assumptions about what it was like for Will to be back here amongst his common folk, the fact that his family were no longer here and in fact had passed since leaving the estate. Whatever she took from it, she nodded and gave a little smile.

"I don't wish to upset him, I like him very much. I can see why my father thinks so highly of him," she continued as they resumed walking. "And why you do as well, Hannibal."

He felt her eyes on him but didn't turn to look as they continued on, the pebbles of the path crunching underfoot.

"I hold him in the utmost and highest regard," Hannibal admitted, and she squeezed his arm.

"Be careful," she muttered softly, "my dear, dear friend. Please be careful."

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Will heard the car drive away from the house and let out a sigh of relief.

He liked Alana, he liked Sir Reginald, but he wasn't like them. He wasn't like Hannibal. He wasn't built for this life and…

A lump rose in his throat at what Angela Budish had said. What if he had been born for this life?

Today had been agony. Those words, and then returning to the house and finding they had to entertain when all he'd wanted to do was sit with his thoughts and perhaps be held.

He had already bathed and crawled into bed when the doors locked, Mrs Hobbs now on her way too, and Hannibal came up to the room.

“Will?” He asked softly as he opened the door, clearly not wanting to wake Will should he be sleeping.

“I’m sorry for being rude,” Will replied, the words caught in his throat.

“Will, no.” Hannibal insisted. Will felt the bed depress and looked up to see Hannibal had taken a seat next to him. “I explained to Alana it has been a taxing time. I think she understood it might be hard for you to be back here, though I said nothing further.”

Will gave a nod, though hadn’t for one moment thought he would say anything to anyone.

“You like her, don’t you?” Will found himself asking before his mind had even considered the question. When Hannibal frowned at him Will idiotically continued, “you would make a handsome couple, both your families would-”

“No,” Hannibal said firmly. “I know what this is, Will. And whilst I am sure you have a streak of jealousy in you, the same as I do towards anyone who might presume to know you better than I, I know that you know I don’t want Alana. That I don’t want anyone other than you, regardless of what would be good or easy. I know this is you deflecting, Will. You’re scared.”

Will’s throat ached and tears stung the corners of his eyes.

“I am. Not of being caught. I’d risk anything for you.” Will admitted, Hannibal’s good hand falling on his chest, over Will’s heart. “I’m scared that we’ll never have this for real. We don’t even have it now. We have from dusk till dawn to be our true selves to each other. I want more, and I know you do, but I don’t see how it is ever possible.”

“Will,” Hannibal breathed out his name and moved, laying over him and holding him tight.

“I’m going back to London tomorrow,” Will struggled to speak through tears and felt Hannibal tighten his hold.

“Please stay,” Hannibal replied quietly but not forcefully.

“It’s too much, Hannibal. I feel raw and flayed. Being here with you, the news today, seeing Alana. I can’t, it’s too much.”

They were both silent for a moment and then he felt Hannibal nod against him.

“You’re right. I understand. We’ve found as much as we can for Zeller, and I have only a few more farmers to visit, which I can do alone. My only reasons to have you here are selfish ones, and I won’t insist for the sake of your health.”

“Thank you,” Will muttered, turning to bury his face in Hannibal’s neck. “I wish I could stay, I want to be with you.”

“You’re always with me,” Hannibal murmured in his ear before turning his head.

Their lips met in a soft kiss. One that slowly deepened until they spent the evening saying a proper goodbye.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The Lecter Estate, 1895.

The Lecter Estate, 1895.

Princess Antonia had not slept a wink since they had arrived at the Lecter Estate.

Their families had been long time friends, and for as long as she could remember they had spent a few weeks every summer in this part of England before returning to their home in Andoretta.

And over the years she had first befriended, then fallen in love with, William Bloom. When his father had died, leaving his estate to Sir Reginald, William had become his brother's ward. But at Nineteen he was almost a man in his own right and when he turned twenty-one he would have his own income from his father's estate.

As soon as the scullery maid lit her fire, Antonia was out of bed and ringing the bell for her maid. Ana was prompt and didn't look quite so weary any more, now used to rising earlier than usual. She was maid to her sister Marta as well, though not her eldest sister Maria who had her own ladies maid now, but Antonia saw it as a sort of favour - getting herself out of the way so that Ana could also see to Marta in a timely fashion.

Once dressed and ready for the day she left her room, to the disapproving tuts of Ana.

This wasn't their home, and it was tradition in the great houses of England for the unmarried women to breakfast in the dining room with the men. It wasn't strictly prohibited to be up and around before breakfast, but it was certainly unusual. Though now Antonia had them all convinced that she simply enjoyed the morning air on her walks around the grounds. There was a crispness to it that felt like an escape from the humidity of Andoretta, so it was a believable falsehood.

It had been raining lightly a few hours before and so there was a slight squelch to the gravel, path that led up to the stone gazebo at the end of the main lawn, and it would be faster to go across the grass. But Antonia knew that if she was to continue to keep this secret, she should not do anything too silly. Like returning to the house with her shoes and hem damp and covered in mud.

So she simply walked in a brisk, but natural fashion, finally arriving at the gazebo and making a show of taking several turns around it before settling on one of the stone benches backed with a thick column that hid her almost entirely from any line of sight from the house.

Antonia sat patiently for a few minutes, before finally she heard the false bird call. And then again, their signal.

With a smile on her face she saw her darling William come towards the gazebo from the other end of the estate, he jogged the last few paces and then quickly took a seat beside her, out of sight.

“My darling,” he muttered into her hair as she fell into his embrace. They took a moment to hold each other before he pulled back and their lips met in a soft but desperate kiss. When he pulled her closer by her waist, Antonia finally resisted and pushed him off.

It only took a gentle shove and he smiled at her as they parted.

“If every morning could taste so sweet,” he made love to her with his words as he pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Soon, I hope.” Antonia promised. “I think father has several options for Maria. Once she is married we will be free to court publicly.”

They shared another smile and Antonia’s heart ached. Despite her seventeen years and Marta’s eighteen, it had been made clear that neither were to upstage their sister by being courted until she had, at twenty-three now, been married. Which would be fine if she could only find a suitor.

The sad truth was that Maria was plain and the king was discerning. He knew full well that any man attempting to woo her was only in it for their own gain. And whilst he actually didn’t have an issue with that, he was not about to take a freeloader into the royal family. He wanted someone that they could equally use in return. Someone not just of breeding, but of talent. A tall ask as it turned out. But it seemed as though her father had settled on several options and Maria, as the years marched on, had no grounds to object.

It was Antonia’s fondest hope that Maria would be betrothed by the end of the year and William would be able to approach her father with his interest. And surely, the king would not refuse an English nobleman?

Antonia was less confident on that point, for William was the second son and did not inherit the land and title. He would have money and need for no profession, and she was but the third daughter, so she hoped that would be enough.

William took her hand and kissed the back of it gently.

“You’re frowning. Please smile, we only have a few minutes before you will need to get back.”

At that Antonia did smile, brightly and with love. And William was unable to stop himself from kissing her again. Kissing her breathless.

When his hand slid from her waist up to her breast, Antonia took in a sharp breath and released it as a low moan. She had never been touched in such a way before, but it felt

wonderful, as did the ache between her legs.

All the same, she broke away, knowing that she must for the sake of propriety.

“William!” She scolded, pushing his hand away.

“Forgive me,” he hung his head and his words were genuinely contrite. “I must tell you, even though it might shock you, that I long for you. We started this as children, content with each other’s company. But as we have grown to adulthood I long for more, I long for us to be as man and wife. For I have considered us married in my heart for a great while.”

Antonia was panting, her cheeks flushed from his confession and from her own longing. She could feel a wetness between her legs and didn’t know what that might mean other than that she wished to find out with William.

“We can’t,” she protested, weakly.

“But you want to,” William didn’t press, it was a gentle question that she could have walked away from, but instead she nodded slowly.

“I do. I want to be with you as a wife is with her husband. And hopefully soon enough--”

William cut her off with a low but strangled sound, “Hopefully. We always must hope that your sister is married off. It has been years now and she is no longer a debutante. Will your father let you and Marta become spinsters for her sake?”

Antonia drew back, shocked.

“William, that was cruel.”

William shook his head, his eyes watery as he dropped to his knees in front of her and rested his forehead against her legs.

“Forgive me. I’m sorry. I wish her every happiness, but I wish for ours too.”
They were both silent for a long moment before Antonia spoke again.

“There is a hunting lodge in the woods on the estate, I could meet you there this evening, once it’s dark. I will say I have a headache and go to bed early. I will tell Ana I need some fresh air if she sees me, and no one will be any the wiser. We could have an hour together. An hour as man and wife.”

William looked up at her, his smile one of utter devotion.

The Bloom Estate, 1896

William sat with the letter in his hands, tear stained now.

What a fool he had been.

When one night had become many, when they had been reckless and abandoned all to their passions, all he'd been able to think of was how they could soon have this for real and forever.

He read it over again, hoping somewhere in the words there was a promise that this would all be alright.

My darling William

I have asked Ana to deliver this personally to ensure it reaches your hand only, for I fear that by morning I will be restricted in such a way that will not allow me to write to you again.

We have been foolish and now there are consequences. Ones that cannot easily be hidden from the world. My father is beyond furious and we will be leaving in the morning. It is unlikely we will return to England.

I have tried to keep us a secret, but my regard for you must be so obvious that your name has immediately been brought to my father. I do not know what he will do. Perhaps returning us home will be enough.

I do, and will forever, love you with all of my heart.

Yours, Tonia.

That letter he had received almost a year ago now, and he was ashamed to admit that it had baffled him at the time. That he had never fully understood it.

Not until this very morning.

Sir Reginald had decided to host something of a party for some officials of his acquaintance, several had come up from London and a few from the continent to stay for the week and enjoy their hospitality.

In truth, having heard nothing from Antonia or anyone of his acquaintance from Andoretta since they left the Lecter Estate, he had not presumed to see anyone from there.

His shock had been tempered when he stood and greeted the arrivals with the rest of the family and they included amongst them a Duke and Duchess of Andoretta and their infant ward. The staff accompanying them included a nursemaid, who did seem a little uncomfortable on her arrival until the servants ushered her and the baby away.

As was to be expected, there was no mention made of the abrupt exit of the Andoretta royals the previous year, or of any suspicions of a liaison between himself and Antonia.

And so it wasn't until the evening approached and the Duke asked to speak with Sir Reginald alone, that William's concern piqued. And yet, fool that he was he had still suspected nothing.

William sat on his bed now, refolded the well creased letter and placing it back in the trinket box in which he kept it.

He wished he had known. He wished he had understood what she had been trying to say in that letter.

But instead it had fallen upon his brother to inform him late last night that the baby accompanying the Duke and Duchess was his very own, the product of his evenings spent with Antonia.

William had cried himself to sleep that night, then had horrible dreams that he could barely recall on waking, only the feeling of emptiness and despair.

If only they had waited.

Maria was to be married in the spring, and Marta was courting. If they had waited then he could have married Antonia, this child could be theirs to raise as a sign of their love and devotion to one another.

Instead, they had cursed themselves, and this child.

He was never to see Antonia again, and the Duke and Duchess were only temporary wards to the child, entrusted with the important task of delivering him to Sir Reginald. How could they possibly dispose of him themselves? They had already used every resource to keep the pregnancy and birth itself secret. What scandal there would be at even a suspicion of this reality. Better that Sir Reginald be tasked with fixing his ward's mistake. In England this child was a nobody from nowhere, in Andoretta he was an explosive scandal waiting to destabilise a region.

He had one day. That was what his brother had told him. One day to come up with an idea or a solution, otherwise Sir Reginald would hand the baby over to an orphanage. He had no interest in raising his brother's bastard regardless of sovereign parentage.

But William had begged. This baby was all he had, all he would ever have, of his union with Antonia. He could not let this boy out of his life, but Sir Reginald would not be convinced.

Whatever he needed to do, it called for drastic measures.

So at the end of the day, having been unable to provide his brother with any good reason or alternative not to give his son to an orphanage, William stole into the nursery in the dead of night. He took the baby into his arms and held him close. He breathed in the scent of his hair, fresh and like lotion. The baby slept soundly, nestled against him as though he knew his own father.

For an hour he sat rocking the baby, trying to work out if this was to be his goodbye or something else.

Before the first birds began to sing, William rose, babe still in arms, and left the house unseen. He wasn't sure where he was going or what he would do, he simply began to walk and eventually he ended up at the beautiful stone gazebo on the Lecter estate.

It was a long walk but one so familiar to him now that he had made it automatically. He sat where he had many times before with Antonia, imagining how this might have been different. How they might have brought their son here together and reminisced over how they met.

When the baby started to stir and grumble, William realised he had been a fool once more. The baby would need feeding and changing. The nursemaid had likely already realised their absence and alerted the house. He really was out of time now.

His son would never grow up like the Lecter boy, that precocious little child who toddled about and was the apple of his parent's eyes. William let out a chuckle and sob together as he remembered the little lord demanding things with a stamped foot - a toy, a bottle. He would never see his own son do that. Unless…

William felt a chill all over his body, gripped with anxious panic at what he knew he was about to do. Defy his brother, potentially bring scandal upon them all. But he had to try. If the Lecters would raise his son as their own then he could at least watch him from afar. And they might not have a nursemaid, but they had bottles for their own young lord.

Would they raise him?

As the baby grumbled again, starting to stir all the more, William felt a shiver over his skin. His palms were sweaty as he began to walk towards the house, and then he broke into a careful trot, holding his son to him until they were at the house and he stood before the servant's entrance.

Next to it stood two empty crates to be recovered by the grocer, and so William held the baby in one shaking arm as he grabbed a crate and set it before the door. Tears streamed down his face as he prayed in his heart that they wouldn't simply do his brother's work and send the baby to an orphanage.

"Please, have mercy." William muttered to he knew not who as he placed the baby in the crate.

The sun would rise soon and with it the house.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

A proposal upsets the tentative status quo.

London, September 1920

“I love you, I love you,” Will muttered against Hannibal’s throat as their bodies pressed together. He could feel the heat of Will’s tears against his skin, he could feel Will clinging to him all the harder the deeper he went.

“You’re my everything,” Hannibal murmured back, “forever.”

With a final thrust he spilled inside Will as they continued to hold each other as tightly as they possibly could.

Hannibal woke abruptly, pulled from the dream of that memory. The months since those days dissolved and he was back in his bed in London. Alone.

His arm ached and it was that pain that distracted from the heavy weight between his legs. Another ache, and one much easier eased though he felt no desire to do so.

He and Will had a routine now. Three evenings a week they met at the club, every third Saturday Will came for dinner. Being intimate was not a possibility beyond the way they could hold each other at the club. Once more they had not yet grown desperate enough for the backroom, and the thought of being able to hide away together alone some time kept them going.

Hannibal rose with a sigh and then scrubbed his hand over his face. He had to wash and dress, he had plans to meet Alana for a morning stroll.

He was still in something of a daze when they met at Hyde Parker Corner and began their walk in the pleasant warmth of the late summer day. The weather had been good all week, and though they were sure to get rain soon, the sun was holding out for now.

“Are you well, Hannibal?” Alana asked with a smile and he gave her a nod in return. They had concluded their pleasant greetings and then she linked her arm with his good one to begin their stroll.

Pleasantries done, they walked in silence, both enjoying the near-Autumnal breeze as the leaves changed. Another routine Hannibal had developed, a weekly walk that was another marker of time moving on.

“Hannibal, you haven’t seemed yourself for a while now and I…” Alana started quietly then trailed off as she no doubt felt him stiffen. He was unsure where she was going with this but he knew she was right. The moments he spent with Will he was happy, they were precious. But their time apart was difficult and he found himself having to rally against Will’s pessimism about their future.

“I am going to be impertinent, so please forgive me.” Alana continued, pulling them both to a halt at a bench and took a seat, waiting for him to join her, which he did.

“I don’t know if I dare ask,” Hannibal frowned as she laid her hand over his hand on his knee.

“Do you know what I did during the war, Hannibal?” She asked, exasperation lacing her tone. He did have some idea, but she continued before he could respond. “I trained as a secretary and worked in the War Office. Do you know what I do now?”

Hannibal frowned and sighed, nodding his head slightly, knowing what it was she was trying to express.

“I wish to work, my life is so much less since the war ended and it makes me feel…” She looked at Hannibal then and there was no mistaking her deep emotion. “I feel like you understand that such an awful time, such an ungodly time, there were bright parts too. I found purpose. I didn’t… I don’t want to give it up and yet, now here I am. Once more my father’s daughter. Only my father’s daughter.”

Hannibal inclined his head to indicate he understood, certain that this was merely the scene setting, the impertinence was yet to come. That seemed especially the case as she squeezed his hand, her eyes slightly watery.

“I need an occupation. But my father doesn’t approve, he wants to see me married and settled, as though the war changed nothing. As though the world hasn’t changed.”

“The truth is, dear Alana, for many it didn’t in principle, despite the scarring on our hearts and bodies. I have all but lost the use of my arm and yet in many ways I can continue to exist as I had before the war, here in London or return to the estate. People like us, for those who wish it, we can pretend the war never happened. That life continues uninterrupted.”

She clenched her jaw and there was a flash of pain in her eyes, anger too.

“I thought you would understand.”

“Don’t mistake me, Alana. I do. More than many might. If I could find a way to change this life--”

“Marry me,” Alana said the words firmly, her gaze pinning him.

He frowned, shaking his head with confusion.

“Alana,” he sighed out her name. “You know we could never be happy. I could never truly be a husband to you… I don’t…” he couldn’t say any more aloud, not even to her. But he was

sure she knew.

“And that is why you should marry me.” She was firm, her hand squeezing his again. “Once we are married, you will allow me the freedom to work should I wish it.”

“Which you do,” he understood now, and his frown deepened.

“And you… You and Will…” She swallowed, stumbling over the words. “I’d turn a blind eye.”

Hannibal slipped his hand from hers and stood up. It really was impertinent and uncouth, but all the same it was their lives. There were so many merits to what she was saying, and yet the thought of marrying anyone but Will, as impossible as that was, made him feel sick to the pit of his stomach.

“Discuss it with Will,” Alana urged, rising and standing next to him but not touching him. “Our families know we are friends, it wouldn’t be a difficult lie to tell them.”

“And what if you should want a loving husband? Or to have children?” Hannibal asked, his back to her.

He went rigid as her hand touched his elbow, the slightest contact as she replied quietly, “you would make an excellent father, if you wished it.”

Hannibal drew a sharp breath at the suggestion and took a step forward, out of her grasp.

“I must go,” he said, unsure what else he truly could say. “But thank you for giving me such things to consider.”

The park was a blur as he stalked away, and he barely remembered his cab ride home. His mind reeling as he thought about meeting Will later that evening at the club. Trying to plan what he might say.

And with each rehearsal in his mind he couldn’t help but wonder if there was some merit in Alana’s suggestion.

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Will wasn’t surprised to see that Hannibal was at the club before him, but he was surprised by his dour expression. Will’s first thought was for Hannibal’s family and then the estate.

“What is it?” Will asked quickly, not even bothering to hang his coat but instead taking it with him to their usual booth. He folded it and placed it on the seat beside himself before taking hold of Hannibal’s hand.

“I spoke with Alana today,” Hannibal’s response was distant and he didn’t meet Will’s eye.

Will nodded, “yes, isn’t today when you take your stroll?”

Will swallowed, his concern changing again as he wondered what Alana might have said. Was Sir Reginald well? Had they found out what he and Hannibal had on their trip?

“Hannibal, for god’s sake, tell me.”

Hannibal seemed to shake himself out of a stupor. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, looking at Will now as he took Will’s hand and kissed the back of it. “I didn’t mean to worry you. All is well, everyone is well.”

“Sir Reginald--” Will started and Hannibal shook his head.

Will still couldn’t feel relief at Hannibal’s words, with him so pensive and severe.

“It’s nothing on that front. It’s just… Alana proposed that she and I should marry.”

Will blinked, then studied Hannibal’s unreadable expression. Not even the slightest change there to give away whether he was joking or not.

Will chuckled and shook his head, “you’re joking, right? Or she was joking?”

“No, Will.” Hannibal squeezed his hand and brought it to his lips again and muttered his response. “She was serious and I… I think it’s something we should seriously consider.”

Will snatched his hand back, an automatic response, feeling stung and raw.

What they had was so tenuous, so precariously held together by what little they could manage, and Hannibal thought the solution was for him to marry someone else?

“I can’t…” Will started but Hannibal hushed him softly.

“Will, consider that if Alana and I married, we could live freer. We would not need to sneak around--”

“No? Will I come live with you too? How does that work? Will I be your valet again, sir? Who will I be in this scenario? When you have children am I the help? A family friend, an uncle?”

“Will--” Hannibal looked pained and Will wondered if he’d even considered how it would work in such a way.

Yes, a marriage to someone who would allow their affair sounded as though it could benefit them. But in reality Will was sure it would change very little, and if anything make it all the more difficult for them.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” Hannibal asked quietly. “You wanted a way for us to be together in a meaningful way, and this will allow that.”

Will scoffed and shook his head, “in my most wistful imaginings I never considered that it would also involve your having a wife. And one who might even be my…”

Will's throat ached and his words choked off as the weight of everything else came crashing down upon him. The days with Hannibal on the estate, the weeks that followed. All emotionally draining before he even considered what they had found out about his possible origins.

He couldn't say any more, he knew if he tried it would be a croak of unsavoury words. And so Will stood and grabbed his coat. He stalked away from Hannibal and out the door without a backward glance.

London, October 1920

"Will," Beverly half whispered his name across the office and he looked up to her nodding towards the door.

There in the outer doorway stood Zeller, removing his hat and tucking it under his arm as he stepped tentatively forward with a satchel in hand. His eyes were fixed on Will, no doubt the reason Bev had alerted him.

Will stepped forward before any of the girls had chance to ask him if he had an appointment.

"Mr Zeller," Will greeted with some apprehension. "I didn't expect you."

"No, I suppose not. I apologise for not sending word of my visit, but I thought you might like to see the results of the investigation as soon as I was able to get them to you."

Will couldn't deny that he was more than curious, and his palms perspired in anticipation.

"The side office is free," Bev muttered, suddenly at his side and giving him a look that told him she'd want to know what all this was about later. Will gave her a slight nod and then directed Zeller to the small office.

Once he'd closed the door behind them, Will indicated for Zeller to take a seat at the large desk that bore the focus of the room, though Will stood rather than taking the chair next to him or the one on the other side.

"Whilst I am of course eager to know what you found, Mr Zeller, you are in his lordship's employ, should you not be going to him?"

Zeller pulled up his bag and began to pull papers out of it and place them on the desk as he spoke.

"You'd think so. But when I contacted him to let him know I was on my way back to London, he gave me this address and told me to seek you out directly."

"I see," Will's heart and throat ached.

It had been two weeks since he'd last seen Hannibal, since that night at the club where he had suggested marrying Alana.

Will had needed some space, and Hannibal had given it to him. How could they make a future together with Alana in it? How could they make a future together at all when this option seemed so acceptable to Hannibal?

Will didn't want to lose him, he wasn't sure he could survive it, but there seemed no way forward. Perhaps leaving Hannibal to marry Alana and let them live a ruse was the right thing, but it was something he couldn't be part of.

"When he returned to London, his lordship updated me with all the details you were able to obtain from interviewing the farmers on the estate and, as you might guess, this assisted me quite well." Zeller spoke whilst shuffling papers and then finally looked up at Will and handed over a small stack.

Will looked down at them, "what am I looking at?" He began to thumb through the assortment of pages - public records, some signed statements, a timeline written out in carefully inked penmanship, a certified copy of a death certificate - it seemed endless.

"Your parentage, Mr Graham. You're looking at the evidence of your parentage."

Will's jaw tightened and he closed his eyes. Was he prepared to know all this? To face all this without Hannibal to lean on?

Will swallowed and opened his eyes once more.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Will feels adrift.

There was a knock at the office door and Will looked up from the papers a moment before Bev leaned in around the doorframe.

“Boss is coming, want me to stall him?”

Before Will could respond, Zeller stood and closed his bag, picking up his hat and setting it on his head.

“I think we’re done here.” He turned to Will. “My details are in the papers if you want to contact me directly with any questions. Let me know once you’ve read through it all.”

Will nodded dumbly, completely focused on the file in his hand as Bev and Zeller both exited the office. He quickly shook himself from the stupor, and followed out just before their boss continued his way across the main office.

Will went back to his desk, taking a seat and setting the papers in front of him. The file itself wasn’t all that thick, but he knew it didn’t need to be in order to hold life changing information. He wasn’t even sure that he wanted to know. But he needed to. Not just where he was from, but now he needed to know specifics. Was he related to the Blooms? Did that impact his history with Sir Reginald? And what did it mean for his future? What did he want it to mean?

Will flicked to the top page, a typed summary.

“Will? Is everything okay?” Will closed the file and looked up.

“I… It’s personal.”

Bev raised a brow and then lowered it into a frown of concern. Over all this time that they had been friends, they had grown close and shared so much, he wasn’t surprised by her reaction. She would know he was keeping something big from her and she’d only wish to help.

“Later,” he continued.

She nodded, though the concern was still there.

“At the club?” She asked, quietly.

Will sucked in a breath at that and shook his head. “No, I… I’m…”

An eyebrow quirked once more and she gave him a slow nod that told Will she absolutely had noticed that he was avoiding the club, avoiding Hannibal.

“Okay, Will.” She placed a hand on his shoulder and gave a comforting squeeze. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Will nodded and Bev walked back to her own desk whilst he shoved the file to one side and got back on with his work.

*

“Mrs Katz,” Hannibal greeted pleasantly though he didn’t miss the way Beverly stilled for a moment before relaxing again.

Had Will told her something? Was she taking sides in whatever this was?

“Hannibal,” she finally greeted, turning to look at him with a soft smile as he took a seat next to her at the bar. “Nice to see you.”

“It is?” He asked, teasing.

She grinned at him. “Always. I just… feel like there’s something going on between you and Will and I don’t want to accidentally put my foot in it.”

Hannibal appreciated her candour and gave a slight nod and smile, “of course.”

“Is it…” Bev started to say something and then hesitated, knowing that she was just looking out for Will and truly didn’t want to overstep. “Someone came to see him at work today to give him some papers, and he didn’t want to talk about it. I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

A flash of jealousy burned through Hannibal for the few seconds before his brain took control back from his heart, wondering who this stranger could be. But he realised almost immediately, it was Zeller, of course. Someone who had cause to turn up at Will’s work, an address Hannibal had given, and deliver paperwork. And as a result another concern arose. What had Will learned? And how was he as a result?

“I see,” Hannibal responded, sure to keep his smile in place. “I believe it was a man in my employ, delivering some papers Will had requested.”

He tried to allay her concerns and give away none of Will’s business, but not so much that it seemed he was putting her off being there for Will should he wish to divulge what was happening in his life.

His own desire to support was kindled. Knowing now that Zeller had given Will the information he had so far, and that it could be potentially devastating, left Hannibal aching to go to Will and be there for him.

“Is it something bad?” Bev asked, drawing Hannibal’s attention as he hadn’t realised he’d drifted off in his thoughts.

“Why would you say that?” Hannibal asked, all the more concerned and wondering what had actually transpired at Will’s workplace.

Beverly shrugged, “Will was cagey, you’re acting weird… weirder than usual.” She grinned at him and he quirked a brow with a smile of his own.

“But seriously, does Will need someone right now?” She asked, moving slightly on her stool, clearly ready to be that someone if he needed it.

“Yes, you’re right. I think he probably does,” Hannibal agreed, getting to his feet. Whatever had transpired and however long this spat might last, if Will needed someone, he would be there.

“Will you excuse me?” Hannibal asked, inclining his head to Beverly but not waiting for a response before he collected his hat and coat and made his way outside.

So many thoughts ran through his mind as he stalked through the streets. What had Zeller discovered? What might it mean to Will? Before he even realised it, he was at Will’s door and realising that this wasn’t exactly discreet.

He checked his watch and it was a little after eight. Not too late for an innocent visit, but certainly anomalous and not to be made a habit. All the same, Hannibal hesitated a moment before pressing the bell for Will’s apartment. He wasn’t sure Will would be so forgiving of his coming here, but he had to risk it. He could only imagine what Zeller’s papers might contain and how they might make Will feel.

When the door opened, Will looked shocked and then angry but instead of closing the door, he quickly ushered Hannibal inside and closed the door behind him.

“What are you doing here?” Will growled, caging Hannibal against the door, clearly not planning to let him any further into the apartment.

“I saw Mrs Katz and she mentioned your visitor. I assumed it was Mr Zeller and wanted to offer you my support should you need it.” Hannibal put it plainly, though he knew he couldn’t keep the emotion from his voice.

Will was clearly still angry, but his features morphed into something desperate as he then moved forward and pushed Hannibal against the door.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, concerned. “What did the papers say?”

Will shook his head, his weight against Hannibal. “I haven’t read them yet, I haven’t had the strength and… I need something. Something here and real. I feel like I’m about to be set adrift in unknown waters.”

“You have me, Will. You have me, let me be your paddle.” Hannibal replied softly, running his hand up into Will’s hair as their eyes and then lips met.

*

Will felt desperate and hollow.

He didn't want to want Hannibal right now, but he did. He was still mad about what had happened with Alana. It still needed to be discussed, so much of it still made Will ache with a pain he found difficult to process.

But for now that all seemed like a distant noise next to the loudness of the papers sat on his table.

Rarely before in his life had he felt so unmoored. So seeing Hannibal there before him felt like something of a lifeline. Despite their current circumstance, here was the one person he had ever wished to see when he'd felt so adrift before. And so he'd kissed him.

And they continued to kiss. Desperate and hard.

When Will whimpered into Hannibal's mouth, Hannibal gently moved him back - walking him backwards into the apartment until they were next to the sofa and Hannibal was pushing Will down.

Will reached up as soon as he realised Hannibal was hesitating, as he should be too. But he pulled Hannibal down to him, pressing their mouths together again as his hands worked Hannibal's clothes open.

"Need you," Will gasped against Hannibal's mouth. He had nothing more to say than that.

"You have me, always." Hannibal muttered as he pulled away, leaving Will to whimper until Will realised what he was doing.

Hannibal sank to the floor, to his knees between Will's legs. Will took in a trembling breath as Hannibal started to loosen Will's belt with one hand.

Frantic now, Will reached down and began unfastening his trousers, allowing Hannibal to free Will's hard cock from its confines and immediately take the head into his mouth.

"Hannibal…" Will breathed out his name, then groaned, letting his head fall back on the seat as he lost himself in the sensation.

Everything slowed down, Hannibal calmed it all down, taking Will slowly and gently. He sucked and swirled his tongue, tasting Will, savouring him. Will whimpered and writhed, falling short of thrusting into Hannibal's mouth.

As Hannibal sucked him all the way down, Will pressed his hips forward and slid his hands into Hannibal's hair. He held him there for just a moment but allowed Hannibal to pull back as he did so. His hands remained in Hannibal's hair as he took him to the root again, and again. Hollowing his cheeks each time until Will was groaning and squirming.

"Oh god, Hannibal…" he clutched Hannibal's hair, tightening his fingers against his scalp as Hannibal sucked harder, deeper, faster.

Will began to tense a moment before he was able to choke out his warning, “I’m gonna--”

Hannibal hummed and sucked harder, his hand gripping Will’s thigh and taking it all as Will spilled hot and fast into his mouth. He continued to suck and lick until Will had no more to give and grew oversensitive.

“Hannibal,” Will gasped, tugging his hair gently until Hannibal finally pulled back licking his lips.

On his haunches, Hannibal looked up at Will with such an expression of adoration that Will trembled. His climax mixed with the intense emotions that had been engulfing him all day was enough to bring tears to his eyes. He slumped back as Hannibal surged forward and took Will in his arms.

“It’s alright, Will. Everything will be fine. Let me help you…”

He nodded against Hannibal’s shoulder and let Hannibal help him stand and walk him into the bedroom.

*

Hannibal woke the moment Will stirred. They lay on his bed, atop the covers and still mostly dressed.

Hannibal’s eyes remained closed in the dim light of the early morning, and he tightened his arm around Will, for a moment losing himself to the memories of those nights at the Estate. His eyes only snapped open when he heard Will’s sharp intake of breath and felt him pull quickly away.

“This isn’t…” Will began, his voice heavy with sleep as he moved off of the bed.

Hannibal sat quickly and watched as Will tidied himself up, his expression distraught as he glanced at the clock on the wall. A little after five.

He turned and fixed Hannibal with a glare.

“This was reckless. You shouldn’t be here. You need to go before someone sees you here.” Will practically growled the words and Hannibal nodded. All the same, he sought to calm Will as he stood and walked to him.

“Will, you came with me to the Estate, it would take little to convince people that we have business together, there should be no suspicions.” Hannibal tried to placate Will, but he knew from the way Will remained tense that it hadn’t worked.

“At this time of the morning? Having stayed the night? Don’t be so naive.”

“Don’t be so concerned,” Hannibal countered, softly. “I understand your fears, but do you really believe anyone watches you closely enough to notice me coming and going this once?”

Will shook his head, his jaw tightening.

“Why are you here?” Will threw the words at him like an accusation.

“Because I thought…” Hannibal felt like he was facing a caged beast. “I thought you might need someone. Might need me.”

“The way Alana needs you?” Will spat.

The words stung because of what it meant. That Will was still angry about Alana’s proposition, he likely hadn’t given it any real thought at all.

When there was nothing but silence between them, Will exhaled, deflating a little.

All the same, he said firmly, “Please leave, Hannibal. Before my neighbours see you.”

Hannibal did as he was asked, taking his things and letting himself out quietly.

This wasn’t the end of course. It couldn’t be. Because Hannibal firmly believed that no matter what, he and Will would find their way back to each other. They had to. There were simply no other possibilities.

And yet, something about the whole encounter from evening to morning, felt devastatingly final.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Everything changes...

Hannibal had tried, unsuccessfully, twice to make contact with Mr Zeller and now resorted to visiting the man's office unannounced. He knocked lightly on the door before letting himself in.

Zeller looked up from his desk, first at Hannibal and then at the door as though wondering whether he could make an escape. When the option was clearly impossible, Zeller winced.

"With that behaviour, Mr Zeller, I might start to think you're avoiding me." Hannibal commented with a mixture of annoyance and amusement. The man's reaction would be comical if Hannibal didn't have such important business.

"Not avoiding, per se," Zeller started with a grimace.

"You've not returned my calls or messages. I hadn't considered our business arrangement over."

"I gave Mr Graham everything I found, as you requested. There's nothing else I can--" the defensive note in Zeller's voice lacked force even though he was right.

"I had further need of you." Hannibal cut him off and finally closed the door behind him, walking the couple of paces that brought him to Zeller's desk. He pulled out the chair uninvited and took a seat.

"I'm overstretched at the moment, I'm afraid," Zeller continued to put him off and Hannibal frowned.

"You know why I'm here, don't you."

Zeller took in a deep breath and then let out a heavy sigh. "Will Graham."

"What do you know?" Hannibal asked.

Zeller mused for a moment, looking uncertain as to what he should or could say or do. Finally he pulled open a desk drawer and retrieved a note, putting it on the desk and with another slight hesitation, pushed it forward into Hannibal's reach.

Hannibal recognised the paper. He'd had a letter as well. Almost two months ago now, Will had sent him a line - *I need some space, we can talk when I return.*

Hannibal unfolded the paper and focused in on the words.

Dear Mr Zeller,

I realise that you were paid for your services, but all the same I'm sure you understand that I feel I owe you a debt. You might know then that I must swallow my pride to write the next.

I am leaving London for a while and if - when - Hannibal Lecter comes to you to ask you to find me, I wish that you would not assist him.

I cannot counter any compensation he might offer you, and so I understand if you are unable to refuse him. But I humbly make this request all the same.

With sincere gratitude,
W. Graham

Hannibal swallowed, folding the note over again and pushing it back across the table.

"I see," he breathed out the words, the pain in his chest almost unbearable. "And is there any amount of compensation I can offer to have you find him for me?"

Hannibal was sure he knew the answer before Zeller considered his words. For a moment he looked like he might be swayed by the thought of setting any price he wanted and undoubtedly knowing that Hannibal would pay.

But finally he took the letter back and placed it back in his drawer before shaking his head.

"Sorry, sir. No. At most I can give you copies of the information I gave to Mr Graham as you had requested, but I will not track down a man who has made it so clear that he doesn't wish to be found. Not unless it's a legal matter."

Hannibal shook his head.

There was a coldness to Zeller's words and Hannibal had to wonder what the man thought of the situation. Might he wonder what or whom Will was to him? Why he had paid any expense to assist a man who had now run away?

On a most basic level Hannibal knew this: Zeller was a working man with integrity. One who through hard work and skill had raised himself higher than his birthright and likely felt an affinity to those he presumed to be under the yoke of those better off. It was understandable to Hannibal that Zeller would take Will's side if he believed he had been wronged by a lord who simply paid for whatever he wished.

The scenarios Zeller might imagine could be endless, but their roles would undoubtedly be set. Hannibal as Will's oppressor, and kindred to Zeller. It was far from true, Hannibal knew deep within himself, but he knew how it might appear.

Will had run away, that was clear. But what was also devastatingly clear was that Hannibal was the reason why.

“I thank you for you time then,” Hannibal rose and took his leave.

*

“Anything?” Mrs Katz asked, having spotted him at the bar and made an immediate beeline before her husband had even had chance to take off his jacket.

“No,” Hannibal replied, shaking his head. “Will doesn’t wish to be found.”

“But, he’ll come back.” Mrs Katz reassured, herself as much as him from her tone. She took the stool next to him at the bar and waved over the landlady for a drink.

“He has indicated as much, but when I first received his note I had not thought he’d be gone more than a week or two. It’s been weeks.” Hannibal’s voice cracked over the words.

Mrs Katz took a sip of her drink and then rested a hand on his arm, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

“He hasn’t officially resigned,” she offered. Something she had noted before. Though they might replace him should they wish, from what Mrs Katz could glean, Will had an arrangement to keep his job open for a while. Though exactly how long that meant was anyone’s guess.

“I miss him,” Hannibal said quietly and felt her squeeze his arm again.

“I know.”

They both ordered another drink and sat in silence.

They hadn’t parted well. Even if it had taken Hannibal a few days to truly understand the length and breadth of that. When he looked back at the things he said, about the idea of marrying Alana, he could kick himself. How could he have been so stupid as to not realise how hurt Will was, much less how such a situation would never suit him.

Hannibal thought back to their days in the army, before they were parted then. Will was his man, little more than a servant. And then he was Sir Reginald’s man, Alana’s father.

What life would it be for Will, a clerk and ex-soldier, the son of a farmer to all outward reports. How would he fit into a marriage between a gentleman and a gentleman’s daughter? Who would he be in their house or on their estate?

Thinking of it now was preposterous and made Hannibal feel queasy. How he wished he’d understood what he was asking of Will at the time. Perhaps then he would never have left.

Perhaps they could have left together. Found a tiny, unpopulated island in some far off place and live out their lives together happy and fulfilled.

He so dearly hoped there might be a future chance of that.

Two Months Earlier

Will alternated between pacing in his small room and sitting - fidgeting - at the table.

He leafed through the papers again, having read them all very thoroughly several times already. His entire life was spread on the table, who he was and where he was from. Or at least what could be known of it.

He hadn't left his apartment for over a day and the bread and cheese were hard. Will didn't touch anything anyway, a nibble here and a glass of water. He had no stomach for more.

He put the papers back into a neat pile and then sorted through them again - a compulsive habit.

The papers were like a patchwork quilt piecing together the history of how he came to be. Some statements from previous staff of the Bloom's who could attest to a relationship between Sir Reginald's brother and a guest at the Lecter Estate.

One from the maid who was assigned to the nurse maid that came to stay with the Bloom's along with a Duke and Duchess. She remembered very clearly that a baby had been with them when they arrived but had gone missing. Very few people were aware, it was all very quietly and quickly handled. As these things were when you had enough money. This maid had been happy to be paid off and had thought nothing more of it in the intervening years.

There was a copy of a death certificate for Sir Reginald's brother, the late William Bloom. By Zeller's estimate on the timeline he had laid out, William Bloom died of influenza a few months after Will would have been taken in by the Grahams.

Will hesitated when he reached the final papers, as he had each time he'd looked at them.

It had all but been made clear whilst they visited the estate, that William Bloom was his father. But these last pages contained the possible identity of his mother. And that was something Will hadn't quite been prepared for the first time he'd read it, or since.

Deduction had led them all towards the knowledge that she was the daughter of a nobleman visiting the Lecters. And, it turned out, the options were a fair number given the parties hosted on the estate.

But Zeller was good at his job. Between staff interviews and recollections, gossip and news clippings, it seemed the timing only allowed for it to be one of the daughters of the Andoretta royal family. Princess Antonia had disappeared from public life less than a year before Will was born.

It was all but officially confirmed, the chances were more than reasonable that Will Graham was in fact the son of William Bloom and Antonia of Andoretta. A nobleman and a princess.

When Will flicked over the page he looked at the copy of a news clipping Zeller had uncovered. A small write up about foreign royalty visiting local nobility, and there was a grainy photograph of the family. The king, his wife and their three daughters. To think he might be related to them made his mind spin and left him with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He had been raised thinking he was farming stock and never hated that life. Had the war not happened he'd have taken over his father's farm. It was a life he'd been well suited to, even if he often felt like a round peg in a square hole. He never felt like there was another life meant for him.

Will let out a shaky sigh and fingered the edge of the paper, another note from Zeller. An address in Paris. Apparently it was easier to track down deposed royalty than one might believe. At least if they made no secret of being a princess.

Will threw himself back out of the chair and began pacing again.

He needed answers now. Now that he had come this far. He could have lived his whole life happy, but now he knew enough of it to need to know more.

And know more, Will was determined to do.

*

"Will? What a lovely surprise." Alana greeted him when the butler let him in. She had on her hat and coat and Will was relieved to realise she was on her way out.

He'd had a shave and a haircut, dressed in one of his best work suits and even wore a tie. Alana looked him over with an admiring smile.

"Forgive my intrusion," Will smiled, trying not to feel as though his heart was being wrenched from his chest. Hannibal's words about Alana's proposal still fresh in his mind. He cleared his throat. "I had meant to make an appointment with your father as I was passing, but your butler was kind enough to let me in and see if he might be free now."

"Oh, I'm sure he will be! He generally spends the afternoons reading but I dare say he'll be more than happy to see you instead. He has mentioned more than once that we should have you around again once we're properly settled."

Will nodded and Alana smiled.

"Well, I must take my leave. I'm sorry, but I'm sure father will be with you shortly," Alana excused herself and fastened her hat. Will gave a shallow bow and hoped that would suffice as he had nothing more he wanted to say. Concerned that if he did say anything it would be to ask if she were meeting with Hannibal.

Instead the moment passed and the butler returned and invited Will to Sir Reginald's library.

His palms were sweaty by the time he went through the door, and he rubbed them discreetly on his trousers before he caught sight of Sir Reginald who rose from his armchair.

"Will, so good to see you," he held out a hand and shook Will's before turning to the butler, "send up some tea, please."

"Yes sir," the butler replied before almost silently closing the door.

“I apologise for dropping by unannounced,” Will started but Sir Reginald immediately dismissed his words with a wave of the hand.

“No need for that. You’re always welcome here.” There was something in Sir Reginald’s tone that brought a silence between them and Will thought he must know. He must have always known, surely.

Sir Reginald resumed his seat and gestured for Will to take the armchair to the other side of the small side table.

Will swallowed and reached into his pocket, drawing out the letter from his father and passing it over the table.

“What’s this?” Sir Reginald asked, automatically taking the letter and adjusting his glasses before unfolding it. He read over it slowly enough that Will was sure he read it three times. “I see,” he finally responded, refolding the letter and handing it back to Will.

“I… I had an enquiry agent look into it…” Will started, wanting Sir Reginald to know that he knew as much as it was possible for him to know.

Sir Reginald cleared his throat and shifted in his seat slightly, but didn’t look uncomfortable. Perhaps, resigned.

“I didn’t know, not at first,” Sir Reginald said, making Will’s breath catch. He had been unsure how this would go, but there was no anger, or disgust. Not so far.

“When you first came under my command I had your background checked, as I would for any man. I already found you familiar and assumed that it was because of your connection to the Lecters and friendship with my daughter, that I must have seen you at some event or other.”

Sir Reginald looked over at Will then, looked him over and shook his head lightly.

“Slowly, I realised that the familiarity was something more. Your mannerisms… Of course, your papers then came through and I found you to be the son of a farmer on the Lecter Estate. And that was when I fully allowed myself to recognise your resemblance to my brother. If your hair was not so curly and your eyes a little less green, you could pass for his double in the right light. So I vouched for your connection with the Lecters to allow you to continue in your position”.

“You never said anything,” Will’s voice was hoarse, his throat tight.

“No,” Sir Reginald admitted. “What should I have said? I didn’t want a scandal, at the time I’d have liked the whole thing to have gone away. We were at war, there were more important things, to my mind. And I was unaware of how much you knew, if anything. Why would I say something when you might not even know your parents were not your flesh and blood?”

His words were harsh but there was a softness to his tone, and whilst it was difficult for Will to hear, he understood there was no intentional malice.

“History caught up with me that day. History long dead and buried. But…” Sir Reginald cleared his throat again and then looked away, embarrassed. “I grew very fond of you. You remind me so much of my brother, and you are a good man. Your mistruth withstanding, a man of integrity and good manner. I… I wish things had been different.”

Will nodded, unable to speak as his throat and chest ached.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Tea was brought but neither made a move to drink.

Finally, Will stood. It was all too much. He had a fondness for Sir Reginald too, but it was so difficult to reconcile the man he knew with the one who was his uncle.

“Don’t think badly of him, Will.” Sir Reginald said before Will could move. “Your father. He was young and foolish and if things had been different he would have stayed by your mother. I might even have allowed it. Hard to say now, time changes things. He loved your mother deeply, I do believe he would never have married another. And he loved you. I know he kept a watch over you until the day he died, and I…”

Sir Reginald’s words choked off, and Will found himself hurting to see such a refined man so clearly cut down by his emotions.

“Thank you for saying so. If he was anything like you, I am sure I would have liked him very much.”

Sir Reginald nodded, his face hardened as he tried to control his emotions. His words harder too as Will began to walk away.

“What do you plan to do now, Will? Now that you know the truth. I have my family’s reputation to consider, a scandal would damage Alana’s marriage prospects. What can I--”

Will held up his hand to stop the man. He knew what came next was an offer or a threat and Will wanted and needed neither, as much as the though of Alana’s potential marriage made his gut sour.

“It has remained a secret so long, I see no reason for that to change. It would up end my life as much as anyone else's.”

“Very well,” Sir Reginald nodded. “In that case, I hope we might see each other on occasion. When appropriate.”

The words didn’t cut as they might have, Will felt too numb to it and held nothing against a man whose life had been lived by the strict and often unspoken rules of nobility. Will was a bastard and a scandal waiting to happen all of which outweighed any reverence due to his parentage.

“Yes, sir.” Will agreed. “Though for now I think… I need some time. I need some time away.”

Those words echoed in Will’s mind even after he had said goodbye and left the Bloom’s house. By the time he reached his own home, he had resolved that echo into an action,

understanding what it was telling him, where it was taking him.

Paris.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Life has moved on... Paris, 1922.

Paris, January 1922

“Chouchou!”

Will closed his book and looked up as a light hand ruffled his hair.

He hadn’t really been reading, just sitting on the balcony looking out over the rooftops and thinking about London. Thinking about the one letter he had sent back to Hannibal the Christmas of nineteen-twenty. It had been on his mind for the last two weeks, since Christmas '21 just passed, and he had considered sending another letter.

The main thing that stopped him was imagining what life Hannibal might have now. He had no doubt that he would now be married to Alana, at least one child between them. Perhaps they were even happy and it wasn’t just a ruse. And perhaps one day Hannibal would meet someone who didn’t mind joining them in that ruse.

But that man wasn’t Will.

He let out a heavy sigh as the elegant older woman took a seat opposite him at the small table on the balcony.

“It’s so cold. You’ll catch a chill.” She scolded him even as she smiled warmly. Her voice was soft and melodical, her English was perfect but her accent almost unrecognisable. For the most part it sounded French, from years of having spoken it daily, but beneath that was the slight Andoretta accent that sounded a little closer to Flemish. It was easy to see why many believed that she was Belgian, and he always enjoyed the way she softly smiled but never confirmed or denied anything.

This enigmatic quality, in anyone else, might annoy Will but in his mother, he adored it. She was in herself beyond labeling or categorisation. She simply was herself and the world moved around her, she did not bend or break for it.

He opened his mouth to deny he was cold - a lie - but was stopped as she fixed him with a glare.

“You are thinking of love again,” she said, her tone somewhere between wistful and admonishing. “You believe you will never again feel its warmth and so the cold means nothing to you. I know chouchou, I have felt that same pain.”

Will swallowed and felt once more comforted by being with someone who understood him so terribly well.

It had been an instant thing between them. Will had spent almost four months in Paris when he first arrived, trying to get up the nerve to meet with his mother. He had enough information from Zeller to be able to find her, and had occasionally looked out for her and watched her from across a marketplace or along a promenade. She always seemed so graceful, almost angelic, that he had found it hard to understand how they could be related.

They were so different. Or so he had thought.

For one thing, much like Will, she was sharp and attentive. She had spotted him on occasion, enough to send her maid to ask him to come and talk with her. And so he had never had to fully get up his nerve, not least because she had recognised him immediately.

He really did look like his father, it would seem. It was so strange to think how that might have gone unnoticed on the farm his whole life had the war not happened. If his hands and face were so often dirty with mud, and the stench of pigs that after a while you forgot was there. That had been a life more suited to him, and he would do nothing to dishonour his parents - the ones who had raised him.

But with very few conversations, each over tea as she invited him to sit with her daily in a small cafe, it was clear how alike they were.

They lived and loved the same way. And when she told him what had happened between his father and herself, how she had loved him, he felt only how that love was the same he held for Hannibal.

With a sigh she shook her head at him and stood again. She stepped behind him and ruffled his hair again, playing with it for a moment as she said, “qu'aurais-je fait de ces cheveux.”

The words were mumbled and Will chuckled as she walked back into the small but luxurious apartment she kept.

He could laugh about it now. But when they had first met, fresh from his loss of Hannibal and newly understanding his own history, it had been painful to even hear her joke of how things might have been had she raised him. How unruly his hair would have been, how wild he would have been, as she had no doubt that he would have hated the life she and his father had been born to.

But he took comfort in the fact that she did joke about it. That all these years later, she welcomed him into her life, gave him a place in her home and heart. She had never married, never had any other children. And when her father was deposed and the family fled, she parted from them. They had sought refuge in Switzerland, she had come to Paris with enough of her fortune to keep her, and had remained.

Will never asked why she never looked for him, or came to him. After all, what could she have done? He was simply grateful that he had her now.

With that in mind, Will rose and walked into the apartment, not wanting to admit that he was glad of the warmer temperature inside as he took a seat in the parlour.

Tonia, as she insisted he call her as maman seemed too childish for them now, was reading a newspaper as their maid poured coffee. He shook his head as she looked over questioningly at him and then gave a nod of acknowledgment.

Ana had been her maid and trusted companion for many years and was hardly that much older than Tonia. She had adored Will from the moment they met and he strangely didn't mind being mothered by the two of them. It was a strange life he'd found for himself here, but when he was with Tonia he felt he was like her - the rock the stream moved around rather than the debris caught in the current.

"News from England?" Will asked, realising that Tonia was in fact reading one of the English papers. It was likely a week old already, but it held no less intrigue.

"Home sick?" Tonia teased.

Will didn't miss it. Not England per se.

He missed some places, certain people. But he found he had no real attachment to the place itself. He had moved so many times now, between the farm and London it felt like he had been all over the world. He could no more miss the rain slicked cobblestones of London than he could the dusty streets of Baghdad. Home had never been a place for him.

But now this was home.

Home enough that he had written his notice to his old boss, and a letter of instructions to the Crawford's. Tonia had paid to have his few belongings shipped over, and just like that, the apartment that he had shared with his father was gone.

Will sighed, not even realising he hadn't answered her. She folded the paper sharply, the sound of it a sharp rustle

"Chouchou, you vex me!"

Will chuckled at that and tried to imagine this woman as his mother when he had been a child or a teen. How interesting that might have been.

"Should I breathe more quietly?" He asked, a tease.

She rolled her eyes at him but then her expression softened.

"You have been sullen since Christmas. I wish you would share with me what it is that makes you so sad. I wish I could help."

Will's chest tightened as he smiled gratefully at her.

"As you say, I've been thinking of love."

Tonia placed the paper on the table and stood, moving over to take a seat next to him on the well-stuffed sofa. She took a hand in hers and squeezed it.

“Did he hurt you so badly?” She asked quietly, a question in her gaze, but it was unnecessary, she clearly knew him so well.

“He?” Will asked anyway, his blood running cold and a lump in his throat. Just in case she had misspoken. Just in case she would stop loving him.

“He, or she. But I feel it is a he. Only a man can cause this much heartache.” She smiled so dearly at him that tears welled painfully, stinging his eyes.

“I… it’s nothing…” he tried to protest. As he would anyone else. But it would seem his mother was having none of that.

“Chouchou, you have lived in my home for almost a year, and despite the lives we have lived, I am your mother and so I can see your heart. Will you finally tell me what it is that has been haunting you?”

Will wanted to refuse, he wanted to stand and walk away, but instead he collapsed into his mother’s arms and she held him as he cried.

London, January 1922

Christmas had come and gone with no word from Will and Hannibal reprimanded himself for thinking that it might be different. Will had only written once since leaving and it was Mrs Katz who told him that Will had resigned and his apartment had been packed up. Of course, given the content of the letter those things hadn't been surprising. But they had hurt for their finality.

Despite only having that one letter, Hannibal’s foolish heart could not help but hold out hope that one day Will would return.

Hannibal sat next to the fire as the evening darkened outside, nothing but the flickering flames to light the paper in his hand.

It was well worn, unfolded and refolded so many times that he had to take care for it not to rip. As it was, the ink had started to fade in places. Not that he needed to read it anymore to know what it said, the words were indelibly marked in his mind and heart.

Hannibal,

You should know that I really had planned to return. That we might talk and understand each other better. But I know there is no way I could be who you want me to be, and as time has passed for me, I realise that I am becoming the person I was always meant to be. And even more so, that man cannot fit into the life you have envisaged.

I believe the only way either of us can be happy is if I reject you now and save any future pain.

I hope you know that you really do have my most sincere wishes of joy and happiness for yours and Alana's future.

Goodbye Hannibal.

Will

Hannibal's hand tensed and, not for the first time, he thought about screwing it up and throwing it on the fire. But then what would he have left?

Hannibal had decided to give Will his privacy when he left, even though Zeller gave him the same papers and he could make an educated guess where Will had gone. Even before the letter arrived with a French postage stamp.

He could have gone looking for him, before this letter. He should have. But after?

There were days when he still wanted to. He even started packing a bag. But that goodbye always felt so final. So even though what Will had assumed was not quite correct and he could refute it and declare himself, what real future could they have?

It had been hard enough before Will began this new life where there wasn't any space for him. And more than that, if Will had finally found his place in the world then how could Hannibal impose on that with his own selfish wants.

It was best to leave Will to his new life and maybe one day Hannibal might be able to do the same.

And yet as Hannibal nodded off in front of the fire he dreamed impossibly of strolling along the Champs-Élysées, hand in hand with Will.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Could they finally step back into each other's lives?

London, January 1922

“Hannibal? Did you hear me?” Alana’s voice was light but there was concern in her eyes when he looked up.

“I’m sorry, I was a million miles away.”

“Hmm,” her features softened, knowing that she was well aware of what he was thinking about. His constant day dreams of being with Will.

He’d spent some months studying the method of loci and developing his own mind palace, every room of which was filled with Will.

“Perhaps now isn’t the time.” Alana’s tone was laced with concern so Hannibal pulled on a smile.

“No, please. Tell me.” Hannibal encouraged.

“Valentine’s Day is a little over two weeks away. Mason’s sister will be visiting and so we thought about having a dinner party on the Saturday before. I wish… I wish you’d come. You’ve been so antisocial this past year, it’s time to get back out there and let people see you. You will feel better for it, I’m sure.”

The words were so close to something Lady Murasaki had said to him that Hannibal had no doubt that they were in collusion.

He took in a deep breath and released it slowly. They were right, of course. And he knew that. He should make the effort to be part of London society now that Will was gone and there seemed no hope of seeing him again.

“Up!” Alana said suddenly when he took too long to reply, she got to her feet and held out a hand to him. “We’re going for a walk.”

Once outside in the fresh air, Alana took Hannibal’s good arm and they walked to the communal gardens close by. It was still cold enough that it was quiet, only a few others out walking.

Hannibal assumed she had simply hoped to encourage him out a little, but Alana remained silent until they were far from anyone else and unlikely to encounter people at the edge of the gardens.

“Hannibal, I need to speak with you about something I was unable to discuss before. Not because I didn’t trust you, but… Initially I hadn’t wanted to tell you and influence your decision on the offer I previously made you. And later it just felt… inapproriate.”

Hannibal stopped and looked down at her, studying her expression as he tried to understand what she meant.

Alana looked away, not holding his gaze.

“You can tell me anything, Alana.”

“I know,” she sighed. “You were always a good friend, Hannibal. And it feels like we’ve only grown closer over the years.”

Hannibal nodded, growing concerned over what this secret could be.

Alana looked around once more to ensure their privacy.

“My marriage to Mason is one of convenience.” She said, the words slow and deliberate, allowing him time to process them. It took him a moment to realise that she meant more than simply them being matched by their families. Her the daughter of a gentleman, he the son and heir to a great estate. Weren’t all such marriages ones of convenience?

“He is… not interested in women?” Hannibal murmured the words, low enough that only Alana could hear.

“It’s a… little more complicated than that.” Alana explained, leading them over to a bench and taking a seat. He settled next to her and waited.

“You recall how Mason and I met?”

“Your father introduced you,” Hannibal replied, but Alana shook her head.

“I met Margot first, his sister. At the stables where we keep our horses. She keeps hers there as well as she has an apartment in the city. She’s very… independent. A very modern woman.” Alana’s smile was broad and Hannibal felt his stomach swoop.

“Alana?”

“We became friends. She told me about her brother, he… he doesn’t like anyone. No, that sounds wrong.” She stopped and thought over her words before continuing. “He doesn’t form attachments and he doesn’t find himself attracted to anyone, he is happy with his own company but his father wants him to marry for the sake of an heir.”

“But his sister…” Hannibal led.

“Yes. She and I… When I offered to help you and Will I had simply never met anyone I felt that sort of pull towards and began to believe I never would. Not everyone is meant for someone else. And then I met her and realised. And now…”

“Mason is a cover for you.” Hannibal concluded.

“Yes. He’s a good man and I enjoy his friendship very much. He doesn’t have the same aptitude as Margot and relies on her a great deal when it comes to their family estate. He is very fond of her and knows her very well, he… understood and accepted our situation immediately, as she knew he would. So I asked my father to introduce us and from there it continued as any other couple might.”

“Are you happy?” Hannibal found himself asking.

Her smile grew even broader. “Yes. Happier than I could have imagined. I wish Margot and I could see more of each other, but we both understood the reality of coming into this situation and what we have is more than most--”

She cut herself shorty and looked at him with something like pity.

He nodded.

“Yes, I understand. And I’m happy for you.” He took her hand and squeezed it.

“I knew you would be, but I admit to feeling awful when I think of you. After I had offered and then--”

“None of what happened with Will and I is your fault. And this situation you have now created with the Vergers is not what would have happened with Will and I. Had the three of us pursued it, I realise now that none of us would be happy. But what you have achieved is right for the three of you.”

Alana’s smile was a little sad as she nodded her acknowledgement.

“There hadn’t seemed to be a good time to tell you this before, but I needed you to know. I hoped… I have a hope that this will draw you out. There can be happiness for you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiled but let out a little huff without meaning to. He knew she’d interpret it correctly, that he saw no life like that for himself without Will, for then she continued in ernest.

“Find him. I know you can. I know you think you are doing the right thing by staying away but I know that can’t be true. I’m sure he’s just as miserable as you.”

Hannibal shook his head. “He doesn’t want to be found.”

“Maybe so, but sometimes we don’t always know what’s the best for ourselves.”

They lapsed into silence and Hannibal nodded, unsure whether he agreed with her or not.

Paris, January 1922

It had been almost two weeks since Will had confessed everything to his mother.

He had held back for so long that it had flooded from him like an unstoppable river breaking a dam.

All this time he had kept it to himself, in some ways because it felt so personal. In others because he hadn't wished to think about it. But there had always been that niggling thought that having met his birth mother and connected with her so well, he didn't want to risk losing her by being honest about the sort of man he was. The sort of attractions he had.

She had scolded him for that. Telling him that within a few short weeks he should have known well enough that she would not care about such a thing. Society was a monster who ate people alive if they were different in any way, and she knew she had a privilege that rose her above that. But this was Paris. This was a new Bohemia. A place populated by all manner of people that fit nowhere else, including Tonia in her own way.

"Do you think you are the only man such as this I have met?" She had said the words in rebuke as much as in comfort. But after that there had been nothing but comfort as he told her everything about the man he loved. How they had met, how their lives had weaved in and out, and how things stood with them now. And at that she had frowned but she hadn't pushed him on it.

But something lingered, and every day he expected her to say something. It felt like she was itching too but looking for the right thing at the right time.

"Morning, ma petite," Tonia placed a kiss in his hair and took a seat opposite him at the small dining table with his breakfast and coffee.

Will looked up with a smile that was only slightly forced and then went back to reading the paper, glad that his French was improving so much that he could understand most of it now.

"You must go back to England," Tonia said, taking up her own paper and looking over the headlines.

"What?" Will asked, "Why, what's happened?" The forcefulness of her words and the strength of the word must, made him wonder if something had happened that he was unaware of. His first thought went to Hannibal and his stomach dropped.

He was just about to ask if Hannibal was okay, if she had learned something she felt he should know, when he saw her teasing smirk.

"Your reaction tells me my words are correct, chouchou." These words were more tender and her smile softened.

"There's nothing for me back there," Will insisted.

"And your reaction says different. You must go back to him, Will."

Will shook his head.

“He’s married now, and even if he wasn’t, we could never have a life together and it would be better if we stay apart than indulge something that can never be.”

Tonia sighed.

“You know, it has been many years since I travelled. And England is quite beautiful on the cusp of spring, I recall.”

“Tonia,” Will scolded and she simply smiled. “And I would come with you I suppose? Is that what you’re trying to force here? And who would I be? Your butler?”

The very thought of it hurt as much as when Hannibal had suggested the arrangement with Alana. Even now, after everything, he’d never be able to be himself one way or another.

“Of course not!” She actually looked offended but Will braced himself for the next. “As my son, Will. My beloved son.”

Will couldn’t help the laughter that burst forth from his chest. He shook his head as his eyes watered a little.

“It is no joke!” She slapped her palm lightly on the table which sobered Will a little.

“It will be a scandal.”

“So? And yes, perhaps when you were born. But you are a grown man and I have money enough to last me not to care what people think. It’s not as though I am a blushing debutant who my father won’t be able to marry off because of my indiscretion.”

“No,” Will replied firmly. “This isn’t just about you or I. What about the Blooms? This would still be a scandal for them. It isn’t like we can hide where I’m from, even if we said nothing it would be easy for people to realise who my father must be if they knew you were my mother. I can’t do that to them. They’ve been good to me, in as much as they could be.”

Tonia looked solemn and nodded.

“Fine, perhaps not as my son. But as something meaningful.”

“I’m too old to be your ward,” Will teased and her expression eased into something a little softer.

“No,” She agreed with a smile. “We’ll think of something. But this is happening, chouchou. I am going to go to England and you will come with me.”

“It’s pointless.” Will protested.

“You love him.” Will shook his head, not disagreeing, but dismissing the relevance. Even so he answered quietly.

"I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with him."

They were quiet for a moment.

"You believe he married Miss Bloom?" Tonia asked, solemnly.

"You know he did."

"I do not know that. And as it happens, I believe it is untrue." Tonia told him, taking what he had believed to be yesterday's paper from beneath her own and unfolding it. An older English paper that she must have had Ana pick up.

She set the paper in front of him and Will read a piece on the Verger estate, naming Alana as wife to the heir. And then he read it again and turned over the paper to see the date. It was a few weeks old.

"When did you get this?"

"Yesterday. I wasn't sure how to broach it immediately. You had seemed so certain after having seen that society paper about Alana Bloom being betrothed."

"It wasn't to Hannibal." Will said, trying to think back to the society paper. It had only been a passing mention and hadn't mentioned the groom.

"It was to a Mason Verger, landed gentry I believe. A very suitable match."

"Not to Hannibal," Will muttered again, his whole body numb as he tried to process something he had come to believe so deeply. That regardless of anything and everything, Hannibal had chosen that path nonetheless and might eventually find happiness with someone else.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Hannibal wonders if it is finally time to try and move on...

Verger Estate, February 1922

Hannibal made a point of speaking with Mason Verger at the Verger dinner party, attempting to grow a friendship there. Not just for Alana's sake but because he seemed the easiest option in this forced socialising he had been unable to decline.

The house had been decorated with red and pink roses and Hannibal was one of a number of guests who were being hosted, having had to come from London. The host himself was a quiet man, but it was clear from interactions with Alana that his wife was perfectly happy with their arrangement. Not that Hannibal spoke on that topic, instead they discussed the Verger Estate and Hannibal found the man amiable.

Though all that did was make Hannibal all the more aware of his own languishing estate.

He should sell, that was his foremost thought. With Will gone there seemed little point in keeping it.

He had imagined that they could make some sort of a home there, have something like those evenings they had spent together when they'd visited before. Though that hadn't all gone as he'd hoped either. As conversations moved on and Alana introduced people to her delightful, if a little terse, sister-in-law, Hannibal felt the envy crawling inside him. All the more so, petty as it might be, for how quick it had been. She had met Margot, fallen in love and now here they were. As perfect a situation as they might find.

He and Will had instead spent years trying to even dare find moments together.

Hannibal stamped down the jealousy and reached instead for the happiness he felt for his friend. Her life was as perfect as it could possibly be allowed to be and he couldn't wish anything better for her.

"Wonderful place, isn't it." Sir Reginald spoke proudly and Hannibal turned to greet him with a nod, not having noticed Alana's father amble over to where Hannibal looked out the window. The sun was getting low but it had been a bright day and the estate looked all the more stunning for it/

"It is indeed, Sir Reginald. I can see why Alana speaks so highly of the place."

“And of her new husband, I should imagine.” There was a cheeky edge to his tone and Hannibal allowed a soft smile, immediately knowing the man’s thoughts and wondering if he’d actually voice them. Which he did. “I thought at one time that you two would make a handsome pair, always so close.”

“I thought so myself,” Hannibal conceded. “But it was clear to us both early on that we were simply better as friends. She is more like a sister to me, really.”

Sir Reginald nodded, “Yes, I understand. You’ve been such good friends since childhood that I suppose sometimes it crosses into that more familial friendship.”

Hannibal nodded again, thinking of his own sister for a moment. Wondering what she might have been like, and his heart swelled for Alana again. Despite the threatening bite of jealousy, he had to wish her every happiness that he’d wish upon his own sister.

“Speaking of childhood friends, have you seen anything of Will Graham?” Sir Reginald asked in a matter of fact way.

Hannibal froze for a moment, expecting that to be the last name he heard here, today. Slowly he shook his head.

“I have not. He moved overseas.” Hannibal managed.

Sir Reginald frowned and nodded. “Yes, I heard. I hoped he might have returned at some point. If he does and you see him, please give him my best wishes and extend an invitation to visit me. I… grew very fond of him over in Baghdad. A fine young man.”

There was a sort of pride in Sir Reginald’s tone, and Hannibal nodded.

“I will do that, sir. Though I am not sure I’m more likely to see him than anyone else. We did not part on good terms.” Hannibal said the words without thought. He had never intended to let people know anything of their business at all, but it was still such a raw wound after all this time, that sometimes thoughts become words.

Hannibal had wanted in some way to apologise to Sir Reginald for the possibility that asking him to pass on a message was fruitless, but that at least was more information than he knew he should give.

That was all the more clear by the way Sir Reginald raised an eyebrow, questioning.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I thought you were firm friends. Alana said something about him possibly helping with your father’s estate. Well, your estate now of course.”

Hannibal nodded, “yes. Though I have no idea what to do with it these days. The world has changed so much and my aunt and I are quite settled in London.”

“The world always changes, my boy. It’s just that war makes it change a little faster than usual and can leave you dizzy.”

“Hmm,” Hannibal acknowledged.

“Why did you part on bad terms?” Sir Reginald pushed, in that way older people did, as though they were entitled to know everything.

“A misunderstanding on my part. But one I was unable to rectify before he left.” Hannibal kept his words clipped and hoped that revealed his desire to move on from the conversation.

“A shame, but perhaps something that can be resolved when he returns.” Sir Reginald smiled, giving a little comfort and Hannibal nodded, though he couldn’t help but wonder if Will would ever return.

*

When dinner was over and the ladies took their leave, Hannibal felt drained though he was too polite to excuse himself.

It had been so long since he’d been social like this, and the spectre of Will hanging over him had made it all the worse. He thought that was as bad as things might get. But then Verger’s butler unexpectedly interrupted their cigars and port to let Hannibal know there was a telephone call for him.

With a frown, Hannibal stood and followed the butler out to the grand foyer, where he was directed to the discretely housed telephone.

“This is Hannibal Lecter,” Hannibal said as he lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Good evening, m’lord, I’m sorry to disturb you, especially so late. My name is Doctor Donald Sutcliffe and your aunt said I might find you at this number and asked me to call you personally.”

“My aunt?” Hannibal quickly interrupted, immediately concerned about why a doctor would be calling on her behalf.

“Please, rest assured she is fine. I was called out to her this evening from my practice as Lady Murasaki took a tumble on the stairs. Her ankle and wrist are both badly sprained, and I have given her something for the pain. No need to cut short your trip, she just wished for me to inform you and allay any concerns should gossip find you quicker than a telephone call.”

“I see, thank you. I appreciate your time, doctor. Is she comfortable now?”

“Yes, she is resting comfortably and I will come and visit her again tomorrow evening to check on her progress, but she should recover fine. I have left instructions with her ladies maid.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal replied, relief flooding him after having immediately thought the worse. He had already lost so much family, and more. Much more.

“I’m at your disposal, m’lord.” The doctor’s words were practically crooned, which surprised Hannibal and he sucked in a quiet breath. “I have left my details with your butler should you need anything.”

“Much appreciated,” Hannibal replied curtly, his face heating in response to the unexpected flirtation, the way those words had been spoken. Hannibal was sure that was what it was. He hung up the receiver before more could be said and called over the butler, asking that his valet be fetched.

Lady Murasaki might be well enough, but this gave Hannibal an excuse to leave early in the morning rather than join the hunting party and spend another few days of forced socialising.

London, February 1922

“You already declined the invitation to the Verger’s party, you didn’t need to go to these lengths,” Hannibal teased his aunt as Chiyoh let him into her parlour as she took her leave.

Murasaki narrowed her eyes and shook her head even though she smiled.

“I had hoped that my not being there would force you to regain some of your sociability, and now you have returned early. Quite the opposite of what I had intended.”

“It can’t be helped,” Hannibal took a seat next to her on the small sofa and patted her hand. She had her bandaged foot and ankle up on a foot rest that wasn’t normally in this room, certainly it didn’t match the decor and that made Hannibal’s lip twitch, which his aunt saw.

“Enough of your teasing. I can see what you are thinking, and yes, I am not best pleased that I do not have a suitably matching footrest, but it will have to do.”

Hannibal let out a chuckle and shook his head.

He was glad to find her well; it had been worth leaving the Verger Estate early enough for the first train to London, if only to put his mind at rest. Which it did, for other than the thickly wrapped bandage around her ankle and wrist, she was in good spirits.

“I will leave you for now then and get settled. But let me know if you need anything.” Hannibal pressed a kiss against her cheek and stood. They weren’t usually overly affectionate with each other and he knew she would take it exactly as intended - his conveying how concerned he had been and how truly relieved he was.

She shooed him away and he heard not another peep from her for the rest of the day.

After unpacking his things and freshening up, Hannibal let out a sigh and settled himself in his study with a book. Relieved to be back in the peace and quiet of his own space. He took his meals there and remained in his sanctuary until the doorbell rang and a minute later Sugden was at the study door.

“Doctor Sutcliffe is here, m’lord. Shall I send him on up to her ladyship?”

“Yes, please do.” Hannibal agreed with nod, “but please bring him in here once he’s finished. I would like to speak with him.”

“Of course,” Sugden inclined his head and backed out of the room.

Hannibal clenched his fist, trying to ignore the way he felt the heat rise in his cheeks again at the memory of the phone call the previous evening. He wondered who this doctor was, how he had such a nerve to be so blatant.

Or would it not seem so flirtatious to someone not of Hannibal's persuasion? He wondered. Perhaps, indeed, it was all quite innocent. Curiosity drove him to find out.

And so Hannibal was ready, dud hand in pocket as he stood next to the fireplace and waited, listening to the wood crackle.

There was a light knock and then Sugden entered again.

"Doctor Sutcliffe, m'lord," Sugden introduced the man that he then ushered in.

"Please," Hannibal swept his good arm towards the usually unoccupied armchair that sat opposite his own. "Take a seat."

The door closed behind Sugden and Hannibal walked to the small bar as Sutcliffe did as bid.

"Thank you, m'lord."

Hannibal shook his head, "You may call me Hannibal." He poured a port for himself then turned to Sutcliffe. "A drink, doctor?"

Sutcliffe gave a smile and a nod, "I'll have the same, and you may call me Donald."

Hannibal turned back, pouring a second glass and trying to ignore the mischief in that smile, that tone.

Sutcliffe was similar in age to himself, Hannibal was sure, though there was a little greying at the temples. He had the trim figure of someone who knew how to eat well, and had a short, neatly kept beard. His suit was good, though not top of the line, but it fit him incredibly well, and gave Hannibal a chance to truly assess him. He was comfortable in his income, and took care of himself. A very presentable professional.

And Hannibal found him very vaguely familiar.

"I feel that we must have met before," Hannibal began as he took the glass over to Sutcliffe before returning for his own and taking it to his own seat. With practised care, he sat without the use of his hands to steady himself and settled, crossing his legs as he studied the man across from him.

"Not met, no. But I believe we move in some of the same social circles."

Hannibal cocked a brow at that, wondering whether Sutcliffe liked the opera, before it suddenly dawned on him and his brow dropped along with his stomach.

Before Hannibal could confirm anything further, and perhaps giving him a discrete way to ignore the words, Sutcliffe continued.

“I must apologise once again for disturbing your evening last night. Your aunt was rather insistent that you be called and immediately given the news before you found out from someone else and worried.”

“She was right to do so, and so were you. There is no need for an apology. It was a large dinner party, I’m sure I was hardly missed.”

“A dinner party for Valentine's Day? I’m sure for a single man that was equal measures painful and dull.” There was a sparkle in Sutcliffe’s eye and there was no ignoring the meaning there, if Hannibal so chose to pursue it.

“You are impertinent.” Hannibal scolded even as he warmed to Sutcliffe’s unwavering smile.

“I can be,” Sutcliffe teased and Hannibal’s breath caught at the now obvious, and frankly scandalous flirtation.

There he knew he should reprimand, propriety demanded it.

“I must ask that you curb your impertinence here, there is a time and a place.” Hannibal’s voice was clear but low and that smile still didn’t waver, nor did the obvious interest in the man’s eyes.

“I would suggest the time and place but I haven’t seen you there for a long time. Nor your friend. Are you likely to return? Without him I hope?” Sutcliffe’s words were equally as low, having the good sense to at least ensure they could not be heard beyond the four walls they were within.

The words stung, though. The reminder of Will. Of realising that Sutcliffe was one of those many people in the background of the club that he gave no attention to. All of it usually focused on Will.

“I don’t think he will return,” Hannibal muttered, his mouth turning down without his permission, an inability not to be mired by sadness.

Sutcliffe’s smile turned sympathetic and he nodded.

“Sometimes reality can get in the way of a great many things. And the heart has no desire to be ruled by reality, I’ve found.”

Hannibal nodded. “You cannot control with respect to whom you fall in love.”

There was a tense silence at the admission and Sutcliffe drank his port before standing and placing the glass back onto the bar.

“If you need a friend, Hannibal, of any measure, I am usually at the club on Friday evenings.”

Sutcliffe didn’t look back to him and Hannibal didn’t respond, simply allowing the doctor to let himself out as he considered whether it was time to try and find a new friend. Not one that

could replace Will, that was impossible. But perhaps one who could make him forget for a moment how lonely he was.

He could imagine himself in the backroom of the club, something meaningless but necessary. Something to break this damn spiral Hannibal found himself in.

Perhaps Friday we would spend the evening out. Perhaps for the first time he would venture into that darkened room.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

As Hannibal contemplates moving on, Will returns from France...

London, April 1922

Hannibal laughed and it felt like the first time in a long time that he had done so.

“Occupational hazard,” Donald continued, raising his hands as he grinned.

Stories of some of the weird and wonderful patients and situations the doctor had to deal with had become a delightful part of their time together. They would meet at the club once or twice a week and share a few drinks at one more secluded tables, and share how their week had been.

Or rather, Donald would share. Beyond these meetings Hannibal’s life was still quite static, unless he accompanied his aunt somewhere. She did increasingly attempt to force him to be social, and he’d received an invitation back to the Verger’s just he and his aunt, but so far he had not responded.

He felt like his life was in a fragile balance.

For the first time since Will left it felt like he was moving towards a new normality. Not a new life but a shadow life. An alternative life, perhaps. One where he hadn’t met Will, hadn’t lost and found him again. But he had, and so there would always be that shadow holding him back.

These evenings with Donald were that other life, but not one he was yet able to give himself over to entirely. Maybe one day he could, or maybe he wouldn’t need to. Perhaps he could find enough happiness and be satisfied to live it as it was.

Hannibal let out a sigh as Donald’s hand fell onto his knee and then slid a little further up. One of the tentative touches he had made before.

“I do so enjoy your laughter,” Donald said softly before leaning in to press a kiss to Hannibal’s mouth. It was a little more than chaste, also still tentative, which Hannibal appreciated. He had explained about Will, or as much as he felt he wanted to, and Donald had been understanding.

He knew Donald was hesitant as he didn’t want to scare Hannibal off, but Hannibal was hesitant because he didn’t want to hurt him. Donald was a good man, well humoured and kind. Hannibal found him to be good company and undeniably attractive.

He wanted that to be enough for this to work between them, but whether that was possible would become clear with time.

All the same, Hannibal kissed him back. Because it felt good and in that moment it felt as right as it was possible to do so.

They kissed slowly and deeply, with Hannibal trying not to compare the kiss to Will, until finally Donald pulled back.

“My housekeeper only comes in the afternoons now. With my work hours I found there was little need for her the rest of the time and I keep no other staff. Would you come home with me? I have no expectations of you. I would simply like us to spend time alone.”

Hannibal smiled, Donald’s expression cautious.

“I would like to say yes, but I don’t know that I’m ready.” Hannibal replied, honestly.

Donald shook his head, “Of course, though I meant what I said. Nothing inappropriate, we could simply sit and talk.”

Hannibal smiled and cupped his hand to Donald’s face, drawing him in for another gentle kiss before pulling back.

“I know, I trust what you say. I just don’t think I’m ready for how… intimate that might be.”

Donald sighed but smiled softly, and Hannibal read that expression well. The one that said he would be patient, he would wait until Hannibal was fully able to put Will behind him.

And some days, Hannibal wondered if he might actually be able to.

“Here is fine,” Donald agreed and took up his drink.

From there the evening was as it ever was, but for one thing. A little before they were to leave, Hannibal spotted a familiar face at the bar, her expression a deep scowl.

He had been avoiding Mrs Katz since he’d started to return to this place, and had seen her there infrequently. It had been thankfully busy or they had been coming or going, and so the opportunity to talk had never presented itself. He had made sure of it, but the look in her eyes told him that wasn’t going to be possible for much longer.

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“Finally finished avoiding me?” Bev asked as she took the seat next to him at the bar.

Hannibal had come alone purposely a couple of times already and not seen her there, but now she was in attendance and he signalled for the server to bring over more drinks.

“I apologise.” Hannibal offered.

Beverley let out a breath, “for ignoring me, or for forgetting about Will?”

Hannibal took in a sharp breath. He knew she would be upset, but the words were cutting.

“I haven’t forgotten him,” Hannibal replied, sombre and feeling himself on the verge of falling back into that well of despair he’d recently been trying to escape.

There was silence for a moment before Beverley let out a sigh.

“No, I know. That was unfair. I shouldn’t have said that. I just… I miss him.”

“As do I,” Hannibal replied. “But, he made it clear he needed to move on. And I have to do the same. I cannot wait for him forever-” Hannibal’s words choked off as he said them. There was a lie in them, not an intentional one, but it was there all the same. Even if he made every effort, put on a pretence even with someone who’s company he enjoyed, he would never truly stop waiting for Will.

Bev laid a hand over his and squeezed.

“I… I want you to be happy,” she said, and meant it he was sure. “Can you be happy with him? The man you come here with?”

“Donald? Yes, yes I think I can.” Hannibal let out a sigh, the words feeling heavy on his tongue. “I like him a great deal. I think I could love him, with time.”

Something like a sob came from Bev but when he looked at her, her face was still. Her emotions hidden even as she squeezed his hand again.

“Then you should. You should let yourself love him. I…” she cleared her throat and collected her thoughts for a moment. “I’m sorry. I had no right to any opinion on it. Will left, he never promised you anything. He left without a word to any of us. It’s not you, it’s Will that I’m mad at. Mad at ruining what he could have had with you. Leaving us all with barely a word.”

Hannibal turned his hand over so that they were palm to palm and he squeezed hers in return. He hadn’t much considered the other people Will had left, all consumed by his own pain.

"Don't be angry. He did what he felt he had to, and as much as I miss him, I do understand." He felt no need to mention the other pressures Will had been feeling about his family. Between leaving the farm, death and revelations, Will's burden had been great. A fresh start would have been undeniably attractive to anyone in such a position.

“So,” she cleared her throat again, “tell me about him. Donald.”

Hannibal huffed a laugh through the tightness in his throat.

“He’s a doctor. A very kind man with a wonderful sense of humour.”

“Sounds horrible,” she grinned, giving his hand another squeeze before letting it go.

He was certainly the opposite of Will, that didn't need to be said between them. And it wasn't something that Hannibal hadn't considered before. Nor the fact that, had he never met Will, Donald was exactly the sort of man he *would* have met. The sort of circles he ran in, to some degree. Though Donald wasn't a gentleman he had become a physician to enough that he was well regarded. They might have easily met and fallen into each other's company.

And perhaps part of the appeal was in someone who could never remind him by comparison of Will.

"Is it getting serious?" Bev asked, and in that were a multitude of other questions. How would it work? How would they manage things? Not everyone was as lucky as Mr Katz as to find such a wife as Beverley.

The truth was, with Will there had been that possibility that they could make a ruse work. If it hadn't been so painful to do so. Their stations in life meant that they could occupy a number of credible roles. With a doctor though? A different plan would be needed if they were to plan a future together.

And that really was something Hannibal wasn't ready to begin considering. That was where the pretence of moving on ground to a halt.

"We enjoy each other's company and I… I know that he wants more. But he has been gentleman enough to take things at my pace and he understands why. I told him as much as was prudent in regards to Will." Hannibal took a sip of his drink.

Bev nodded and silently sipped her own drink. They both held that silence a long time, comfortable in it as they both considered the life that might have been and wondered where Will Graham was now.

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Edinburgh, Scotland. April 1922

"Darling, would you see how we go about getting a newspaper from Paris?" Tonia asked Ana as the faithful servant buzzed around Will as he packed his travel bag. "Anything will do, even Le Petit Parisien. I'd like to make sure the place is still standing without you there to ensure it."

Will choked back a laugh and Ana huffed, leaving the room with a pointed look at his mother. All the same, Will knew she'd quickly recover and he appreciated Tonia intervening. He'd found Ana to be quite the mother hen when it came to him. Something that was comforting and warm, but sometimes a little too much for someone like Will. So used to keeping himself hidden and at a distance from people.

It was good to live with these people who accepted him for who he was, and Will had to admit that he felt nervous about travelling alone to London and being bereft of that. He was going to go on ahead and find suitable accommodation for Tonia and would stay in a hotel there whilst she remained in the hotel in Edinburgh.

They'd arrived in Edinburgh two weeks earlier and had taken a suite at one of the best hotels near to the modest residence of Tonia's oldest nephew and his family. Whilst she intended to go to London, and Will was under no delusion that it was for him, she'd felt they needed to visit family first.

It had been years since she'd been to the United Kingdom, and her older sister's son being in Edinburgh made it their first stop to visit for a month or so. But, it was clear to Will, Tonia had other motives beyond that.

Whilst he packed his bag ready for the morning train, they would be dining this evening with her nephew - Will's cousin. And for the first time in any formal setting, Will would be introduced as Tonia's private secretary and companion.

"You're nervous," Tonia observed as she looked over at him from the settee.

Will let out a breath and nodded. She was right, though he couldn't say for sure how much of that nervousness was about meeting the family and how much of it was about returning to London.

And how much about seeing Hannibal? Because that had to be inevitable.

Will had spent what amounted to weeks, maybe months, going over what had happened between them and how he had left things. Or rather hadn't. Just that letter.

A letter he had truly felt was right at the time. But at the time he'd felt trapped and hopeless. It didn't seem like there was any way ahead for him with Hannibal, no way for them to ever be together. And all that alongside no longer understanding who he really was in the world.

It was right, what he did. He needed to leave. But he also needed to go back, and no matter what happened to them in the future, he had to at least apologise to Hannibal.

He had to make things right.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

> When he left, Will was the son of a disenfranchised farmer, he returns as the personal secretary of a deposed Princess.

Edinburgh, April 1922

“Aymer, how you’ve grown.” Tonia greeted her nephew who was at most a year or two younger than Will.

They had been led into a reception room whilst Ana had gone below stairs, and that had been a strange thing for Will after how things had been in Paris, but seemed natural to Ana. They spent so much of their life together, the three of them, living as equals to a larger degree, that it was always strange to be reminded that she was a servant. All the more so, because in truth Will felt he should go with her. But that wasn’t who he was now, wasn’t who Tonia had made him.

He stood there in one of the expensive, tailored suits she had purchased for him. Part of an overall makeover she had insisted upon, for their story had to be a believable.

“It’s so good to see you, Aunt Antonia.” Aymer took her hand and kissed it before leaning in and kissing both her cheeks. His warmth was genuine and Will knew they hadn’t seen each other for several years and not since Aymer’s mother had passed.

When they parted he turned his attention to Will, hand extended and a welcoming smile, “And this must be the Mr Graham you mentioned in your letters.”

“Yes sir,” Will replied, inclining his head in acknowledgement as he took Aymer’s hand and shook firmly.

“My aunt has told me what a great help you have been to her.”

“I’m glad to be of service.” Will smiled and felt an immediate connection with the man as he had with Tonia. Despite the surface differences, he could see that had things been different, he and his cousin would have been close. Not that Aymer would ever know that.

There was something to be said for deposed royalty, Will decided. No longer nobility per se, they had the airs and graces, they had the connections, but a much more modest lifestyle.

That said, the man that would have been heir to the throne still lived in a level of comfort that matched the likes of the Lecters and the Blooms. He had married into a landed Scottish family and still had some family wealth of his own. But all the same, having been around the

Blooms and Lecters, it wasn't overly daunting to Will and whilst he wasn't exactly at home, it was within his expectations and as comfortable as that might be for him.

Tonia had passed Will off as a personal secretary, highly recommended by Sir Reginald, though she had never spoken with the man. Or at least not since before Will was born, though Aymer didn't need to know that either.

He just knew that his aunt was getting older, unmarried and childless, and so having a younger person she trusted to handle her affairs was a good thing. Especially as she made clear how trustworthy the former officer and personal secretary to Sir Reginald was.

Will had no doubt that the increased mention of him in her regular letters would be nothing short of glowing. She'd made no secret to him that her fond hope was that they would get along, even if they weren't in a position to reveal his true identity.

"She speaks very highly of you and your family," Will replied in return and conversation went from there. He was introduced to Aymer's wife, Sarah, and they had a pleasant chat over aperitif before dinner was served.

It was a lot less formal than Will was expecting and he wondered how much of that was to do with the changing world they'd found themselves in post-war. Certainly, whilst there were enough staff to manage the evening, there wasn't the overabundance that often seemed for show back before the war. Will thought of the huge number of staff the Lecters employed when he was a child. So much pomp.

As with anything and everything Tonia had steered him towards, Will felt comfortable and at ease if not at home. There were some things he would never grow accustomed to, but in his guise as her personal secretary, he was being introduced to the life he should have had, but in a way that kept him at ease. It was the skill of someone like him, someone who never really belonged in that sort of family. Their deposition had been an opportunity for Tonia that she had not squandered, and now passed those benefits onto Will.

And Tonia had been right, he and Aymer got on very well and Will was immediately accepted by them. At first he was sure they went along with their aunt bringing her secretary as a guest as one of her eccentricities, but nothing was ever mentioned about it. As though this was a common thing.

He guessed when you were nobility you could set your own rules, and Tonia certainly did where she could.

It was strange to revert to calling her m'lady and such, but they managed well and everyone was happy when the evening came to an end and as they talked of fishing, it was all the clearer that they indeed enjoyed Will as a guest.

It was only as they were leaving, and Will automatically began to help Tonia with her coat and hat, that she scolded him.

"Don't do Aymer's people out of a job, chouchou." It was a light tease and Will's cheeks burned a little as he stepped aside for the maid to assist Tonia as the butler helped him into

his own coat.

As he did so, Aymer's eyes met his and alongside his smile, his brow creased ever so slightly and for only a moment. Perhaps he would dismiss the pet name as one of Tonia's quirks.

Will assumed that to be the case as nothing more was said other than to wish him a safe journey to London and swift success in finding a residence for Antonia.

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London, May 1922

The first thing Will did upon arriving in London was engage an enquiry agent to assist in finding somewhere suitable for Tonia. A small but well appointed house would suit, but Will had no idea how to go about finding such a place with the budget she had given. After all, it was well beyond his normal means.

Given that the house would be bigger than her bijou apartment in Paris, she had also asked him to employ a housekeeper, cook, butler and maid. For that he had posted the jobs in several places in the area the agent was looking for accommodation, and revisited daily to collect any interested responses. It seemed likely he'd be able to interview and appoint the positions as soon as a house was secured, and that thought made his chest swell. The knowledge warmed him that he was doing for Tonia not only exactly what she needed, but also something that made this more than a pretence. After all, as her personal secretary these were all his duties and could not be called into question. The ruse would be firmly in place before she even arrived in the city. Which, of course, was also part of the point.

The next thing he did, for he knew it was a thing he must do without having discussed in any great detail with Tonia, was go see Sir Reginald. It was right to have everything settled between them before he run into Will or, even worse - his mother - in the streets of London with no explanation.

And so Will rang the bell of the Bloom's grand London home and was admitted by the expectant butler a week after he had arrived in London.

"His Lordship is expecting you in the study, Mr Graham." the butler informed him as he took his coat, then led the way to Sir Reginald's equally grand office and library.

"Will!" Sir Reginald stood and walked to him, meeting him at the door and clapping his hands on Will's shoulders. "It is good to see you. I… When I look back I was concerned that we perhaps parted on bad terms."

Sir Reginald looked him over, studying his face, looking for those signs of his brother that he had seen there before, Will knew.

Will smiled and shook his head, allowing himself to be led over to the small bar as the butler closed the door behind him.

“Not at all, Sir Reginald. It was… a difficult time and I think we both felt that. But there is no ill will on my part. In fact, I’m here to head off any misunderstandings that might arise.”

“Is that so?” Sir Reginald raised a curious brow and handed Will a glass of whiskey before indicating the chairs that they then both took by the large window.

“I wished to inform you before you found from any other source, Princess Antonia is to visit London. She will arrive within the month, I am currently arranging lodgings for her.”

Sir Reginald stilled, and then pursed his lips. Finally he took a sip of his drink and nodded.

“I see. I am glad of the advance notice. May I ask, what is it she plans to do here? Not in London per se, but… Well, Will I know you’ll take my meaning. Does she have any thoughts on involving my family in her affairs?”

Will shook his head.

“I can say with absolute certainty that she does not.”

Sir Reginald visibly relaxed, his body softened so that it was all the clearer how stiffly he had been sitting.

“Allow me to explain,” Will started. “This is the reason why I wished to visit you, to put your mind at ease. Neither myself nor Princess Antonia have any plans to involve your family in any affairs, nor to involve ourselves in yours. I know you could likely have guessed from the last time we met, that I might seek out Prin… my birth mother.”

Sir Reginald’s jaw tightened but his expression remained open and he nodded.

“It seemed the obvious thing you would do. And, if I may, I am glad you found her. The situation was never of your making and it was a shame it caused you any suffering. I’ve had a lot of time to think since we last spoke, and whilst I can’t say that things would have been any different, I do wish no one had suffered from it all. Including you and your mother.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” Will smiled and let out a soft breath, feeling for once that he truly was speaking to Sir Reginald as an equal. Not as a man promoted above his station, not as a confidant, and not as a bastard with information to hold over him. Tonia had made something of him and he was now only realising the full extent of that.

“I have been living with her in Paris, and she was determined to have me in her life in a meaningful way.” Will watched as Reginald’s jaw tightened again. “I’m too grey to be passed off as a ward, and neither of us wished to make the truth public, for the repercussions it could have to many concerned, and equally as innocent in these things as myself.”

He knew they were both thinking of Alana when Sir Reginald gave a grateful nod. She might have married well, but Will did not know her situation and what kind of man her husband was - whether this sort of scandal would see her thrown over.

The irony was, had she married Hannibal and the truth came out, he knew Hannibal would never throw her over. But being with Hannibal would be the only reason Will would ever

consider revealing the truth. Not that he ever would.

“Instead, I am now in her employ as her private secretary. After all, you provided such a glowing recommendation.”

Sir Reginald raised a brow and Will raised one in return. A gesture that made it clear they were family as much as it made clear that Sir Reginald was now a part of this ruse and that was his penance.

“So I did,” Reginald replied, inclining his head.

“Yes. So, now she is coming to visit London for a while, a few months perhaps. Maybe longer, and she may well wish to meet with the families she had associated with in her younger days in this country. Yourselves, the Lecters, a few others that I believe are still at their estates. I am sure she would be keen to meet with you and express her gratitude for recommending me to her.”

“Quite so,” Reginald replied, a little gruffer now but it was clear there would be no argument. After all, these terms were very light indeed.

Will sighed and took a moment before saying the next words.

“I will address you this one time as my uncle, and beg that you forget the past and allow my mother to do the same. Instead, it is my fondest wish that the Blooms be good friends to her. She is coming here to help establish me in her life, to make our connection to each other known. And for her sake, if I could ever mean anything to you, I ask that you be her friend.”

Sir Reginald looked away, looked out the window and studied a passing carriage with deep intent. And for a moment, Will thought he might have pushed too far, but finally the man looked back at him. In a low, emotion filled rumble he replied.

“Will, I know you to be a good and honourable man. One that, if things had been different, I would be proud to call my nephew. And as you address me now as uncle I will answer as such and tell you that I will be friends with your mother, I will extend to her every welcome that my parents did to hers. And I will do so not only because it is the right thing to do, but because in another life, you are a nephew that I am exceedingly fond of.”

Will’s jaw tightened then and he cleared his throat, trying to hold back the sob that wanted to surface and barely managing to hold back the tears that stung his eyes.

“Thank you,” he managed as they shared a smile of deep affection.

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When the letter with the Verger seal arrived, Hannibal winced.

He already knew his shortened stay would be met with another, insistent, invitation. And so soon, though that didn’t surprise him. Alana was nothing if not persistent.

And yet when he cracked the seal and began to read, Hannibal barely made it halfway before he had to shake his head and return to the start, to ensure he fully understood.

Hannibal, my dear friend.

I am writing with news that I hope you yourself are already privy to.

This morning I received my usual weekly letter from my parents. My father writes that Will Graham has returned to London.

There was more to be said. That he is now in the employ of an old friend of his on my father's recommendation and that he hopes Mason and I will visit soon so that we might all have dinner together. The friend will be residing in London for a while and my father knew her when they were much younger, I suspect your parents knew her too - Princess Antonia of Andoretta. Not that there is such a place any longer, but still quite a thrill to have even deposed royalty amongst us!

This is not the point of my writing though, for as soon as I read the letter I knew I must write to you and let you know, had you not discovered so already, that Will Graham has returned!

You must do with that information whatever you see fit.

All of my very best wishes
Alana Verger.

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

A desperate reunion.

In body, Hannibal sat in the club, as with most Tuesday evenings. He sat next to Donald and smiled at his latest tales of strange and wonderful patients.

His mind and, dare he say his heart, were still in his study reading and rereading the letter he had received that morning from Alana.

So much so that it was a long few moments before he realised that Donald had asked him a question.

“Sorry?” Hannibal blinked.

“Are you quite alright?” Donald asked, looking him over. Hannibal half expected the doctor to raise a hand to feel the temperature of his brow. Instead he just took Hannibal’s good hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the back of it in a gentle caress. One that broke Hannibal’s heart.

“I had…” Hannibal started and then stopped. The strangest thing was, he needed a friend to talk this over with, and in his heart Donald was that friend. That was all he could ever be, he’d known that before the letter but been unable to fully admit to himself.

And he was so in need of a friend now, not a lover.

“I have the highest regard for you,” Hannibal prefaced, but was unable to continue when Donald cut him off with a chuckle and a shake of the head.

“It’s alright, Hannibal. I knew this might happen sooner or later. And it really is alright.” Donald said softly, squeezing Hannibal’s hand. “I know you’re fond of me, but that isn’t enough for you. I understand.”

“No, it’s… Donald, I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell me, what has you upset?”

They were silent for a long moment until Hannibal slowly slipped his hand from Donald’s and reached into his breast pocket, a practised move now with only one reliable arm. He pulled out the letter and set it in front of Donald who dutifully opened it and read.

When he placed it back there was another silence, one full of a tension Hannibal regretted, but finally Donald released a sigh and spoke.

“As I said, I knew this day might come. Do you have plans to meet him yet?” Donald asked, his voice still gentle.

“I don’t deserve your friendship, you need not carry on a pretence of it if--”

“Hush, Hannibal. No, we’re friends. And I hope we shall always be so, even if that is all we are. Tell me, you’re not yourself, you’re… well, you’re as you were when we met. I don’t wish for you to become withdrawn again. Please, share your burden.”

“I only received this letter this morning and have not made contact with Will myself. In fact I do not know where he is, and he has not contacted me at all.” Hannibal admitted.

“I see,” there was sympathy in Donald’s tone. “You are upset that he hasn’t contacted you.”

“Yes, I am.” Hannibal spoke plainly and met Donald’s eyes.

“I think that is understandable, Should you contact him? Forgive me, I don’t mean to presume to know the intricacies of your relationship.”

Hannibal breathed out a sigh and took hold of Donald’s hand.

“You are such a good man, I wish things could have been different--”

“You love him,” Donald pressed, not a question but a statement, and not one given with any negative or exasperated tone. It was as though he were simply pointing out a fact. One that Hannibal couldn’t deny.

“No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential.” Hannibal muttered, more to himself than Donald.

“And so you had to let him go. But now he’s back.”

“Indeed.”

“Let me be a friend to you, Hannibal. Let me encourage you. Whatever there is between yourself and this man it must be resolved one way or another. And to that end you must meet, even if it is for you to initiate it.”

Hannibal’s eyes stung and for a moment it was all too much. He sank a little in the chair, just wishing it wasn’t this difficult. But Donald was right, either way Hannibal had to face Will and perhaps then he could move on, if that was the outcome.

Though Hannibal didn’t dare get his hopes up in any way. Prudent, he supposed, after all Will hadn’t contacted him.

“Thank you,” Hannibal muttered, which was met by a “tish” from Donald, who simply squeezed his hand.

“Contact him, Hannibal. Meet with him.” Donald encouraged. “And, as someone who has come to care for you, I wish for your happiness.” He paused and then grinned, “Selfishly, of course I hope that you meet and discover that you are quite repulsed by each other. But I would be the worst kind of person if I stood in the way of it. I just ask, if you do find there is no future there, then consider that there could be one with me.”

Hannibal smiled at Donald, who beamed back at him as he felt the weight that had been on him all day lift.

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“Damn and blast,” Will cursed as he stood at the hotel’s reception desk and turned the note over in his hands, running his finger over the Lecter seal on the back of it.

“Sir?” The concierge asked. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Well, I hope not. I had been meaning to write a letter to someone and they have beaten me to it.” Will forced a smile, which the concierge returned.

“Of course,” a polite nod. “Is there anything else, sir?”

Will was still getting used to the way he was treated at this hotel. It wasn’t the most expensive, but in a price range that Tonia had insisted on, a level of comfort she insisted he have. And between his new look and the authority he had as her personal secretary, he was treated with respect where he’d expected to be treated as an inconvenience.

Part of him hated it, and in that first moment he had realised that was the reason Tonia hadn’t wanted somewhere more expensive. She’d known he wouldn’t have been able to suffer that.

“No, thank you.” Will smiled, gave a nod and made his way to his room.

He cracked the seal as he went and read quickly the words in Hannibal’s hand. The invitation.

He had only a few hours to decide which of the fine suits he should wear to meet Hannibal. Though he was tempted to dress in something Hannibal might more likely recognise him in.

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The restaurant was modest, Will noted as soon as he arrived. Will wondered if booking such a modest place was out of concern for how he might feel, or for Hannibal to be less likely spotted. Certainly, they had never met like this before.

Never in a social way like this.

All their socialising had been done behind closed doors of appropriate venues.

This felt strange and unsafe, but deep inside Will also felt a swell of hope. It was a small swell, but one that wouldn't take much feeding to grow. After all, he was now to move in the same social circles as Hannibal, the ones his birth had intended.

He gave his name and was treated with the same respect as at the hotel as he was led to the table. Part of him had hoped that he would be the first to arrive, as though that might give him firmer ground to stand on, but Hannibal was already there.

Will took in a sharp breath at the sight of him and hoped the waiter didn't notice as he pulled his chair for him.

He looked beautiful, like the sun shining through the clouds after a storm. But there was no ignoring that he looked to have lost a little weight and had darkness around his eyes. Will felt a stab of pain at the thought of having caused that.

"Will," Hannibal greeted, standing and offering his good hand to shake. Will reached out and as their hands clasped he felt the same electric heat shoot through him as it always did when he touched Hannibal. Each touch, no matter how small, was a tiny intimacy just for them.

This handshake was no exception, as they held on a moment too long before finally letting go and taking their seats.

Hannibal ordered a bottle of wine and the waiter left them to look at their menus.

"It is so good to see you," Hannibal muttered, his eyes cast down at the menu.

Will swallowed, unable to speak for a moment for fear of the noises that might escape his throat.

Instead he nodded, and then finally replied, not looking up.

"I've missed you."

They both sat in silence, studying their menus as though they weren't laying themselves bare to each other.

The waiter came back with the wine, which Hannibal dutifully tested before it was poured and their dinners ordered. Alone once more Will had no excuse not to meet Hannibal's eyes, which he did.

"I want to apologise. For the way I left things. I thought…" he shook his head. "I had misunderstood and believed you married Alana Bloom. By the time I discovered differently…" he trailed off and shook his head.

"I don't want to flatter myself that this is the reason for your return." Hannibal's tone held the slightest note of hope and that made Will smile.

"It is, in a way. When I found out, Princess Antonia took me into her employ." Will gave Hannibal a meaningful look, wanting him to read between the lines, which he must have done from his gentle smile and nod.

“I heard. You are her private secretary? A very good position.”

“Yes,” Will confirmed and agreed. “It was her choice to come back to England, I’m simply here in my capacity of employment. She wished to come and see old friends, and their families.”

It went unsaid that Lecters were amongst those, and Hannibal smiled again, so soft and open.

“I meant to tell you I was here, I meant to arrange to meet.” Will said quickly, needing to say it.

“Why didn’t you?” Hannibal asked, gently.

“I wanted to understand you before I laid eyes on you again.” Will said, hesitantly putting the words together. “I needed it to be clear; what I was seeing.”

“Where does the difference between the past and the future come from?” Hannibal asked, their eyes locked.

“Mine? Before you, and after you. Yours? It’s all starting to blur.”

Hannibal smiled with such adoration that Will’s heart fluttered and his chest swelled. It was almost painful.

“What now, Will? What happens next?”

“The future. It all seems a lot clearer now.”

*

Hannibal trailed his fingers lightly down Will’s side, grazing over the goosebumped flesh.

“I never thought we’d do this,” Will muttered the words against Hannibal’s neck, making Hannibal shiver.

“Not unless we were desperate enough,” Hannibal agreed, his hand sliding around Will’s back and holding him close.

They had barely stopped to hang their coats when they arrived at the club. They didn’t order drinks and Hannibal simply gave a nod to Freddie at the bar as they walked directly to the backroom. The dinner had been so long. Polite conversation and reconciliation turned to tension and longing. They had barely finished their food when they agreed on where to go next.

“I’m desperate enough,” Will rasped as Hannibal pressed against him.

It was relatively early, but there were two other couples in the room. A couple of women kissing sensually on a couch, a man on his knees before another man in a corner. But as they staggered their way to the secluded booth in the far corner, everything around them disappeared.

There were no other sights nor sounds, only their bodies as they finally settled onto the soft velvet of the couch in the booth.

“I need you, god how I need you,” Will’s words really were desperate as he pushed Hannibal down and straddled him. “Any way that I can have you.”

They kissed again, deep and hard as Will rocked himself over Hannibal’s growing hardness.

What was lacking in the friction was made up for with the way Will kissed him, the way he moved. As though he couldn’t get close enough. As though he wanted to crawl under his skin.

When they broke apart to catch their breath, Will muttered against Hannibal’s mouth, “I want to be inside you.”

Hannibal moaned in response and shuddered. He wanted that too, that and more, but there was a limit to what even desperation would allow here. It wasn’t like they had come to dinner prepared for this.

“Soon, my love.”

Will nodded and began to kiss Hannibal again, his hands moving between them as Hannibal moved his good arm to slide his fingers into Will’s hair and keep him close.

All the while Will fumbled between them until his trousers were open, and then Hannibal’s too.

The kiss broke again as Hannibal’s head dropped back. He panted whilst Will spat in his palm and then took them both in hand, stroking them hard and fast together.

“Oh god, Will…” Hannibal was breathless, his body shaking. He wasn’t going to last long, and from the way he felt Will throb and pulse against him Will was in the same near state.

The both writhed, thrusting into Will’s fist in such a haphazard way that it shouldn’t be as pleasurable as it was.

“Need you, need you…” Will panted over and over as Hannibal nodded.

“I know,” he choked out the words, “please never leave me again.”

They were kissing again and Hannibal could feel the dampness of Will’s tears falling on his own cheeks.

“Never,” Will agreed, muttering the words against Hannibal’s mouth as he writhed harder, stroked faster.

With a sudden bright sensation, a buzz of electricity through every fibre of his being, Hannibal cried out and came. With a cry of his own and a whole body shudder, Will did the same before collapsing forward.

They panted against each other, sated for now though it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t nearly enough.

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal make important declarations to each other.

London, June 1922

“Oh yes, Chouchou, this will do for us. What time do the staff arrive?” Tonia spoke as she walked through the foyer of the London house. Will couldn’t help but beam at a job well done.

“We shall just have to manage tonight, they all start in the morning.” Will replied.

“Manage, pfft!” She waved her hand dismissively. “As if I haven’t managed without a full staff for years.”

Will stifled a grin as he heard Ana pointedly clear her throat. She had managed perfectly well because of Ana, and the full staff now was just for show. But all the same, Ana’s loyalty shouldn’t be overlooked, but that was their way.

Just as pointedly ignoring her, Tonia continued, “Do you think it would be too much to host a small dinner party tomorrow evening?”

“You’re not wasting any time.” Will chuckled.

“Nor should you,” Tonia fixed him with a glare, good natured as it was. “I would like to invite Count Lecter for dinner.”

Will blinked and glared back at her. “You don’t hav-”

“I’ll do whatever I please,” Tonia waved a hand again. “You can send him an invitation now, Ana won’t mind popping it over, will you dear? And if he is agreeable then we can set the staff to it once they arrive.”

“Do you think it’s a little obvious?”

“Having an old friend for dinner? Why should it be? Our families were close, you’ll recall. And now we find ourselves both in London.”

“In that case, you should also invite his aunt,” Will suggested.

“Of course, though I’m not acquainted with her.” Tonia agreed.

“You just want… are you trying to vet him?”

“I don’t know what you could mean,” her scowl hiding her amusement. “Go. Write your letter and we shall see if they will come.”

*

Hannibal looked outside as the clouds drew in.

“Do you mind terribly?” His aunt asked.

“No, not at all.” Hannibal replied, turning back to offer her a smile.

She was still recovering from a common cold, and now that it had started to rain, she wasn’t inclined to leave the house, especially with only a day’s notice as kind as the invitation was.

“Please offer my deepest apologies. I’m sure as a woman of my own age or so, her highness will understand.”

“I’m sure.” Hannibal agreed, trying to understand his own feelings on the matter. Aunt Murasaki would have been a buffer of sorts. But equally the fewer people there meant more of his focus could be on all the more on Will. And part of him was desperate for that.

Since their reunion almost a month earlier, they had barely had enough time together. A few evenings at the club when they were both able, but nothing so intimate again. Instead they spent their time together making plans for the future, tentative as they were.

But at least now they seemed less like a fantasy. Eventually they would be together, and perhaps tonight was a step forward in that.

The hackney pulled up outside and Hannibal kissed Murasaki’s cheek as he passed her to get his coat before rushing out into the rain and straight into the awaiting carriage.

By the time they pulled up outside the Princess’s modest townhouse, the rain was coming down in sheets. Even with an umbrella, Hannibal caught some of it though not enough to drench.

He had to admit though, it had him flustered slightly. Not exactly at his absolute finest for this dinner, essentially a meeting of the family.

All the same, Hannibal was shown into the sitting room by the butler and joined a few minutes later by Princess Antonia herself.

“Oh my, to think last time I saw you, you were barely walking. How wonderful,” the Princess walked forward and took Hannibal’s offered good hand, holding it firmly as she smiled at him.

Hannibal should have been expecting the warmth, but he hadn’t expected the lack of formality. Will clearly didn’t fall far from the tree, he mused, and perhaps he’d have grown-up as out of place with royalty as it would seem. The thought was somehow reassuring and

brought a peace to Hannibal. To know that, no matter how he might have been raised, Will would have always been the same man beneath it all. The man he loved.

“Your highness,” Hannibal replied, inclining his head as the holding of his hand restricted a full bow.

“Tssh, no need to stand upon ceremony here. I won’t have it.” She let go of his hand to wave her own dismissively, before stepping beside him and linking her arm with his good one. “Come, I wish to speak with you for a moment. Will is waiting in the dining room.”

He nodded and allowed her to lead him from the rear entrance of the sitting room across into a small private library and study. It was a comfortable space, though lacking in a personal touch. That reality made him wonder how long she, and therefore Will, planned to stay - his and Will’s tentative plans feeling very much like they might be hanging by a thread.

As they walked he repeated the content of a note he’d already sent over a few hours later, “my aunt sends her deepest regrets, she was looking forward to meeting you.”

“And I her. I am sorry she is unwell,” the Princess talked as they walked, taking a slow stroll around the library. “But I am glad to have you alone. And don’t worry, I’m not here to warn you from my son, not when I know you are the best thing for him. The thing - the person - that makes him happiest.”

She stopped walking and Hannibal did too, swallowing hard at her candidness as she stepped in front of him, meeting his eyes. Will had already made clear she knew the truth of what they meant together, but to have it so boldly addressed was startling.

“I’d hope Will already knows this, but I want you to be sure too. Whilst I cannot make public my relationship to Will, he will be my heir. He is my son in more than name, he is my heart and I love him dearly. I know this world might not be kind to him, to you both, should your own truth be known, and so I will do anything and everything I can possibly do - until my dying breath - to ensure you are both safe and comfortable. And together.”

Hannibal couldn’t speak. His mouth was dry and a croak was lodged in his aching throat.

He had expected, from things Will had said, that the Princess was comfortable with their relationship, but this was beyond any support he’d imagined. He would have been grateful for nothing more than a blind eye.

When her gentle hand cupped his face, Hannibal was startled from his reverie and felt a single tear break loose and roll down his cheek.

“Thank you,” he finally managed, voice hoarse.

She smiled and stroked away the tear before removing her hand. “It does not mean that you two should not be careful, gossip is always best avoided. But I’m sure we will find some balance with time.”

She turned and began back towards the library door, though Hannibal remained still for a moment before his mind finally communicated to his legs and he began to follow her. Even so, at the door she stopped and turned to him.

“I will say though, this weather is frightful. I will get a spare room made up for you so that you don’t have to travel home in this downpour.”

Hannibal inclined his head, “thank you.”

“And, Hannibal. Please just ensure for the sake of gossip, that you are in that bed by the time the scullery maid starts in the morning.” He tone, her expression, it was all so mischievous but with an edge of something more serious that said she saw this as no joking matter.

She saw this as her son’s happiness, and she was as committed to that as Hannibal was himself.

*

Will trembled as he moved over Hannibal, dipping his head to kiss him deeply.

The door was locked, the staff gone for the night. And finally, finally they could be together in a way that they needed to be. As married couples might be - not just the intimacy, the sexual relations, but just having the freedom of this time together.

Will wondered if he was a hypocrite, but this felt different to the time they had been at the Lecter Estate - having just those hours between the staff leaving and when they returned in the morning. But it *did* feel different.

Perhaps because the reason for them being under the same roof felt less contrived, though it really wasn’t. Perhaps because his mother was in on it, a cover or front for them in some ways. No one would think anything of Hannibal staying over at her home in these circumstances.

It couldn’t be a regular thing. It wouldn’t do to draw attention. But there was more cover to it than what they had been doing at the Estate. Tonia and Ana would say nothing, unless it was in their defence. It had the benefits of the arrangement Alana had suggested, without either of them having to take a wife.

If only he could take a husband, Will thought with a stab of pain as he pulled back from the kiss.

They might never have such a thing in the eyes of others, but they could between them.

“Marry me,” Will’s words were a rasp, just above Hannibal’s mouth.

“Will?” Hannibal frowned at him, because of course the question was absurd.

“We’ll make the vow now, just for the two of us. No matter what, we’re married in our hearts.” Will spoke passionately as Hannibal studied him, wide-eyed. “Married in our hearts and souls.”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, breathless. “In my heart and soul I am your husband.”

“And I’m yours,” Will agreed before he leaned in and captured Hannibal’s mouth with his own. A slow and deep kiss as their naked bodies aligned, moving together.

*

Hannibal was near delirious with pleasure.

Not just physical, but a deep joy within his chest, radiating throughout his body at the thought of his husband. That promise they had made, to be only and everything to each other.

Deep down he knew it was all he ever wanted. All he ever needed, to know that they indisputably belonged to each other and would never seek another. Not now, not since they'd been reunited again. For good, this time he was sure.

"Darling…" Hannibal groaned as Will finally pushed inside him. After weeks of want and hours of tender attention, he was slick and open and so very ready to take Will inside his welcoming body.

"Should I stop?" Will asked, hovering above him, between his legs and inside him. He was surrounded by Will and still it wasn't enough. He loved having Will, and he knew Will enjoyed that too, but they had built a hunger to this moment and Hannibal could barely process the fullness, the intimacy.

He shook his head, "keep going," he panted.

Will nodded and then pressed their foreheads together as he slowly moved forward. Hannibal groaned as he took each inch of Will, seeking his mouth until those groans were swallowed and Will truly began to move.

Will’s arms curled around his shoulders, holding him close as he moved slowly deeper and then retreated. Hannibal moaned, lifting his legs to take Will deeper until they were wrapped around his hips. They moved together, wrapped up in each other as Will rocked inside him, slow and deep, driving them both to the brink of wanton insanity.

It was only when Will slipped a hand between them that Hannibal realised how close that edge was. It took only two firm strokes for him to cry out and spill between them. He groaned and went pliant, overwhelmed by the sensation of his body tightening around Will, being able to feel every inch inside of him.

"I love you…" He managed in rough rasp as Will continued to move. His face contorted as Hannibal's body gripped him, until finally it was too much and Will spilled inside him with a deep, guttural moan of indelible pleasure.

"You're my everything," Will panted as he held his trembling body above Hannibal's. "My husband."

Lecter Estate, July 1922

The world is changing. Hannibal can feel it.

Not just his world, Will's world, but the world as a whole. There is a change coming, he can feel it keenly. A dam set to burst, allowing the waters to flood and revive the landscape.

A cultural change that seems to be simmering beneath the surface, waiting to engulf cities like London, Paris, New York.

Perhaps it was just wishful thinking, or a sign of his own desires, because one thing had become clear whilst he'd increasingly spent time with Will and most especially his mother, was that there might be a life for them beyond England.

Hannibal breathed in the cool warm air, full of blossoms and sweet grass, with every step across the vast lawn.

The estate had been well kept by the groundskeepers he had eventually employed, and the Hobbs family had opened up and aired out the house in preparation for their arrival. But none of it could hide the disuse. The place felt empty, hollow.

It wasn't a home. It never could be because he and Will could never reasonably live there.

He'd made that decision before leaving London, but this felt right. One last summer here for him and his aunt to say goodbye. And then he would sell and leave this life behind him.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Hannibal hosts a great party at the Lecter Estate.

Lecter Estate, August 1922

“Right you are, m’lord,” the groundskeeper donned his cap as they said goodbye on the beautifully carved steps of the old mansion. “I’m at your disposal.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.” Hannibal held out his good hand and it was heartily received in a firm shake. “I will be in touch.”

The groundskeeper inclined his head and then went on his way, taking some of Hannibal’s troubles with him.

In two weeks the agent would arrive to begin the process of selling the estate and the groundskeeper would do what he could to assist. He certainly knew the estate better than Hannibal ever had.

That had become so strangely clear when he had returned at the end of the previous month. It was only then that he realised how little time he had spent in this place. His childhood felt like another life, one with parents and adventures with Will. And then he’d been away to school, then to war. And other than what felt like a brief time of recovery on his return from the front, he had barely been here since.

And whilst everyone was polite, and many of the farmers on the estate even greeted him jovially - this wasn’t his life. He wasn’t his father.

Hannibal drew in a shuddering breath and closed the door behind him instead of returning inside, taking a stroll across the open lawn as the groundskeeper made his way up the long drive.

He would miss the air, he decided. There was something about it that brought back fond memories of his childhood. Even so, too much of a good thing was inevitably bad, and more than once in the last couple of weeks, his strolls had ended with stinging eyes and a tight throat.

This was a place for ghosts now.

“Han!”

He stopped and sucked in a sharp breath. He swallowed before turning to face Will.

His face was flushed and he held his jacket over his arm, his collar undone in a way that was practically indecent.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed out his name, tightening his fist as he resisted throwing himself into Will’s arms. “Where did you come from?” Hannibal looked past him and realised he must have come up the track alongside the stream rather than the road. Certainly he had seen nor heard a carriage or a motorcar.

“Our train arrived not long ago. I decided to walk up from the town to ensure everything was ready to receive her highness.” Whilst the words were in part true, Hannibal knew better on all counts. That much was clear from the way Will broke into a smile. “I left her and Ana to have some lunch. I have charged a driver with bringing them and the luggage on once they are ready.”

“And are you hungry?” Hannibal asked with no attempt to hide the double meaning.

Will smirked, almost lasciviously so. “Always.”

Hannibal chuckled and turned, continuing his walk as Will fell into step beside him.

“I do not think you will be missed, as no one knows you have arrived,” Hannibal murmured quietly, his good hand brushing against Will’s as they walked.

“I think you’re right.”

They said no more until they reached the secluded old stone gazebo.

“No one can see us here,” Hannibal said as he moved between the columns until he knew he was completely hidden. Will followed him, moving close until they were pressed against each other.

“How I have missed my husband,” Will muttered the words just above Hannibal’s lips before taking a kiss, supping at his lips as though they would revive him.

The kiss was soft and slow, but eventually left them both breathless until they had to pull back. Moderation would be key over this coming week, in fact this might be their one and only chance to be intimate. Even so, a kiss would have to suffice.

“When does the rest of the party arrive?” Will asked. Hannibal couldn’t help but smile at the hesitancy in his voice. He might now be the companion of a Princess, but he certainly had no love for these sorts of gatherings. And, Hannibal found, he didn’t much either.

When he was younger he grew up knowing this was his place and that he would one day host the sort of grand parties that his parents had - having dignitaries and nobility to stay for days on end, for dinners and hunting parties and whatnot. But that life had been interrupted and now he found no real need or desire to revive it.

This was one last spectacle. One last ruse. One last show that he was a Lecter in more than just name, before finally declaring that this place was no longer of the Lecters.

“The Blooms are staying with the Vergers and their whole party will come and go. They will be here tomorrow evening for the big dinner and they will be at the shooting party, that at least is set. The Prince Aymer and his family arrive this evening. It will be a late train in from Scotland, so I have arranged for Mr Hobbs to meet them and ensure they arrive here safely. The rest arrive in the morning, but I think most of those are not of your acquaintance.”

Will nodded, his expression pinched before he relaxed and a smile spread.

“I’m looking forward to seeing Aymer again. I enjoyed his company a great deal when we visited. I think we’d have been close friends had we been children together.”

Hannibal waited for a moment, expecting Will’s expression to turn melancholy as it might have in the past. But it didn’t. This was a happier, more whole man who knew who he was. And as much as he might regret and even perhaps mourn a past that never happened, he did not dwell on it as he might have in the past.

What a change it was. What a man he was.

His husband. Renewed, but still Will. The best version of himself now that he had truly found his place in the world.

And now Hannibal had to do the same.

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“Oh, how my back aches!” Alana complained as she took a seat on one of the strategically placed tree trunks that now served as wild sort of benches.

“I know what you’re doing.” Will smiled at her as she rubbed her back and stretched her legs under the rather fine hunting skirt she wore.

When her face reddened he wondered if he had missed the mark, and so quickly followed with. “You know that I have no aptitude for shooting and so you are creating the excuse for how we have returned without a single brace.”

Her cheeks cooled a little then and she chuckled, shaking her head.

“My back aches and my ankles are swollen. But it is true, you’ve not made a single shot. And now we’ve fallen too far behind.” She nodded behind him and he turned to look to see that, indeed, the rest of the party were now well ahead, moving onto the next haunt of the red grouse which were in no short supply on the estate.

“Are you alright there, sir?” One of the young men hired to assist with the day trotted over to them but Will waved him off.

“Quite alright. Lady Verger isn’t feeling her best so I think I will walk her back. If you could let her husband know and pass our apologies to his lordship.”

The young man nodded and took off once more at a fine pace towards the ever moving rifles.

“Come on,” Will smiled, offering his arm. She took it and held it tight as she stood, and when she was steady he began to walk. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Hmm, if you must know, I’m with child. But I only tell you this because I believe you to be the soul of discretion. It is not yet widely known, though I’ll not be able to hide it much longer. We had… Before, we lost a child, so we want to wait before making an announcement. To make sure.”

Her words were soft and gentle and he felt an overwhelming sense of affection and protectiveness towards her. Not least because she had felt she could tell him such a private thing.

“I am sorry, and I hope all will be well this time. And of course, you have my silence.”

Alana smiled softly at him before looking ahead again, back towards the big house a good twenty minutes walk away.

“I’m surprised you didn’t wish to be with your husband,” Will said, in a tone that he hoped reassured he didn’t mind at all.

“Oh no, he and Margot take this sort of thing very seriously. They will be back with more dead birds than they can carry between them. They are best left to it.” She chuckled and then stopped walking.

“Are you alright?” Will asked, immediately alert to her comfort and wellbeing.

“Yes, well. I suppose I also wanted to spend some time with you. We know so much and yet so little of each other and I don’t like that. I want us to be friends. And…” she looked around them but even the rest of the party were well on the horizon now, moving away from the house. “I know what you and Hannibal mean to each other, and I know he will have told you of my offer. One that I meant only as a means to your happiness.”

Will patted her hand where it still sat on his arm.

“I know. And it was appreciated even if not welcome,” he grinned at her and was pleased when she grinned back.

“It’s a strange thing, isn’t it? All these secrets we have. I know about you and Hannibal, and I have to suppose he has appraised you of my own situation. Convoluted but happy as it might be.”

“Only in the barest detail,” Will reassured.

Alana’s smile broadened. “We have to protect each other, and not just because we all have these secret lives, but… because we are kin.”

She looked at him directly then, her eyes a little glassy. Will swallowed.

“Your father told you?”

Alana gave a hesitant nod. “Not that he had wanted to. Or, perhaps he had. It’s a difficult situation. I think he needed someone else to know so that he didn’t carry the secret alone, which I know you can understand. I hope you’re not mad at him.”

Will shook his head, “He’s my favourite uncle, I could never be mad.”

Alana laughed at that and shook her head. “I love this, seeing glimpses of the boy Hannibal first fell in love with. Scruffy little thing that you were.” She paused, thoughtful. “So strange to think, raised on a pig farm and yet all that time…” She shook her head.

“And so we are kin,” Will picked up with a fond smile.

“Indeed we are, and whilst we may never be able to acknowledge each other as such, I will state here and now that you are my favourite cousin.”

Will laughed, deep and loud. Alana joined in until the sound of their laughter scared three hiding grouse from the nearby thicket and into the air, drawing even more laughter from them both.

*

Will never thought he could enjoy something like this. All the pomp and finery. And anywhere else he would not, but here on Lecter estate it was the people he enjoyed.

Spending time with his family, whether that was something they would, any of them, be able to own, was a joy.

Shooting with Alana, fishing with Aymer. He'd even found a fond familiarity with Sir Reginald over a few hands of cards. It was all a delight he would not likely have chance of again and intended to savour.

He stood at the side of the foyer, watching the guests mingle in this final gathering before people began to leave in the morning. A tight feeling in his chest, but a full and happy one.

"This company suits you well," Aymer spoke and Will turned to see another secret cousin at his elbow. "Your place at my aunt's side is a good one."

It was the smile that gave away the honesty in the words.

"Can we talk?" Aymer continued quickly and nodded toward the door.

They walked nonchalantly, greeting others and talking of trout and carp until they left everyone else behind and strolled the lawn.

The air was balmy and it had been a warm day where, luckily, the most taxing thing had been a picnic held on the main lawn.

During that gathering, and all others, including their fishing trips, Will felt he and Aymer got along famously. So it was with some concern that he walked in silence, his mind automatically supplying that now came the family warning. Putting him in his place to ensure he was not swindling the Princess. Be that as it may, Will remained quiet, allowing Aymer to lead.

They slowed their stroll and Aymer cleared his throat.

"I hope you don't think I'm too impertinent in discussing this but… When I was a teenager I became aware of a rumour about my aunt, and as she was, and is, so dear to me I was appalled and scandalised on her behalf. Enough that I wished to silence this rumour, amongst so many falsehoods that surrounded my family after their deposition."

Aymer stopped both walking and talking, turning to Will and openly studying him for any signs of acknowledgement. But Will remained stoic.

"It is a convoluted tale, but the end of it is this: I came to believe the rumour to be true and that, short years before my own birth, my aunt had a child."

Their eyes were fixed upon each other now and Will knew Aymer could see it. The truth of it.

"I believe," Aymer began hesitantly, "that in this world my aunt has a son. A fine man of excellent moral character and staunch loyalty. Spoken of highly by officers and soldiers alike, for both his courage and intelligence."

Will flexed his hands, his palms sweaty. It was abundantly clear that after their meeting in Scotland, Aymer had indeed suspected something and looked into him.

"I believe," Aymer continued, his tone warm and gentle, "that good fortune reunited mother and son and now they do by each other as is right. And when my aunt, many years from now I hope, passes, I know that her son will be provided for and no one," He looked pointedly at Will, "no one shall stand in the way of that."

Will swallowed, his throat dry and tight he was only able to nod.

It was unexpected, to them both it would seem, that Aymer then quickly pulled him into a tight embrace. He muttered next to Will’s ear.

"I embrace you now, dear cousin, as a friend. A dear friend who will always have a place in my heart and my home."

Will found his own arms circling the man and holding him tight, finally managing a strangled, "thank you."

With a pat on his back, Aymer released Will and laughed fondly.

"We can speak no more of the past, but I do hope for the future we will be the best of friends."

Will nodded, his eyes stinging.

When he'd learned of his origins he's expected to be shunned on all sides, and to find otherwise was beyond even his imaginings.

"Come, we should return," Aymer slapped him on the back and Will nodded again, a sense of knowing himself even better than before descending upon him.

*

The Blooms and Vergers had bid farewell, the last of the day visitors to leave, and now all the guests were heading for their respective rooms.

The final day all together, with the remainder leaving in the morning, Will included, the future suddenly felt palpable.

For a few days the estate had become as it had been when Hannibal was a boy, and now in scant weeks it would be offered for sale. The end. A beginning.

Hannibal stood in the library that had once been his father's and looked out over the main lawn. Such activity it had seen in the last week, it was barely visible now as the summer sun began to set.

"Han?" Will let himself in quietly and came to a stop an appropriate distance from Hannibal. Appropriate should anyone come in, though not as close as Hannibal would like of his husband.

“You’re going to miss this place,” Will said, reaching out and resting a hand on his shoulder.

Hannibal was silent for a long moment before finally replying. “I think, once, that would have been true. There is nothing to miss but memories, and I can take those with me.”

“That’s maudlin,” Will squeezed his shoulder.

“We, neither of us, live in this world any more. I’m not sure this world even really exists. Not since the war. And I can’t say I miss it. What you’ve found, Will. The freedom you’ve found to be yourself, that is something this old world doesn’t hold. I hoped it would. I hoped we could be together here, build some sort of life away from prying eyes, but we know that to be impossible. And so what use is it to me, or to you. What we have is important, wherever we can have it, and that will never be here.”

Will's hand slipped down his arm and took his hand and they stood like that for as long as they dared.

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will find their place in the world.

Chapter Notes

I had considered ending this story in the 1920s, the point at which they've finally found happiness together. But I really wanted to chart a bit more of their lives and getting deeply into it didn't feel like it would quite work for this story. So from here on in there are some time skips, taking us from here and through the final chapter to show the rest of their lives together. I know that sort of thing isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it felt right for this fic.

London, September 1922

“It’s done,” Hannibal took a seat at the bar next to Will, a sign that he wasn’t going to be staying long, otherwise he’d have grabbed a table. It wasn’t one of their usual nights.

“It is?” Will asked, looking up as Hannibal leaned down and kissed his cheek before signalling Freddie for a drink.

“There is still paperwork, money management, more paperwork. But the contract of sale has been signed. A businessman from America, good luck to him.”

Will chuckled, “he might find it a little more sedate than the wild west.”

“Ha!” Hannibal shook his head, “I’m sure some of the locals will contradict that point. Besides, I believe he’s from New York.”

“New York,” Will replied, wistfully. It seemed so far flung, but appealing. Perhaps because living in Paris had given him the desire to travel more without there being a rifle in his hand or a trench to occupy.

They were both silent for a moment before Hannibal let out a heavy but content sigh. Will slipped his hand to Hannibal’s knee and squeezed.

“It’s a big change.”

“In some ways,” Hannibal agreed. “It hasn’t felt like home for a long time, and I knew it never would.” He lay his own hand over Will’s. “But it was still part of my family, something I have to assume my parents would have had expectations to stay with me. My heirs and theirs.”

“You said it yourself, the world is changing. You’re certainly not the only landed gentry who has sold up in recent years. Though possibly the only one to have wanted to.” Will asked gently, “what will you do now?”

“I have enough money to do nothing, should I so wish.”

“You always did,” Will chuckled. “But what do you wish for now.”

“To be with you.” Hannibal answered without hesitation, leaning across and kissing Will again as his drink was set in front of him. “And perhaps first, a vacation.”

Will smiled, his heart painfully full.

New York, March 1923

The fine hotel they found themselves in had been Tonia’s choice, but most evenings Will and Hannibal found themselves in Greenwich Village or The Bowery.

They had, all three of them, made the decision in advance of leaving England, to travel under assumed names. That and their money had allowed the sort of anonymity they knew they must be grateful for. All but their official papers read Tonya and Will Fermier and Han Lewis.

The anonymity and the money allowed Will and Hannibal to explore life amongst, what the press called, male sex perverts, but whom they came to know as welcoming friends.

It truly was a different world, a new world. One of theatres and nightclubs catering specifically to them and others like them. A whole new world of men who loved other men. It was breathtaking and overwhelming.

Will woke with a groan, feeling his head thud from too much whiskey the night before.

“I think we may have met our limit,” he heard Hannibal chuckle. He squinted as he looked over to see Hannibal in his robe, glass of water in hand. The dividing door between their two rooms was open as usual, and so far the hotel staff had nothing to say on the matter. It was clear that money bought discretion, and the false names made them no one anyone would care to know about.

Will shuddered at the thought.

If it was known that this man was Count Hannibal Lecter and that the older woman with them was not Will’s aunt but a deposed European Princess, then things would be very different. Like the plot of some gauche paperback.

Will rolled onto his back, pain exploding behind his eyes as he did so.

“I agree. Everyone is such a bad influence,” he chuckled, though that hurt as well.

“It has been… quite the experience. And something I have enjoyed exploring with you these last months, but it isn’t quite like our sedate little club in London.” Hannibal smiled, sitting next to Will on the bed.

“No,” Will agreed. “I think… I’m getting too old for these things. Perhaps when I was a younger man…” His smile faded and he saw the look in Hannibal’s eyes that knew was a resonation with what he had said, what he felt. A reminder that even had they had access to such places as younger men they could have made no use of them as they haunted muddy trenches and dusty streets.

Hannibal placed down the glass so that he could take hold of Will’s knee with his good hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Perhaps our vacation is coming to a natural end?”

Will shook his head. “I don’t know…”

He was thoughtful for a moment before he hauled himself up in the bed, propped against pillows. He picked up the glass and drank the remainder of Hannibal’s water before setting it down.

“I… miss my family. Words I didn’t think I would say after my father passed, but I do miss them, as new as they are to me. I was sad to leave them after such a short time. Being accepted by them as Tonia’s son was something I could never have hoped for. But, could they accept who I really am? Who we are to each other? Perhaps some, but to live the sort of life back in England that would allow me to further my relationships with them, would have made any with you impossible. As much as I feel love for them, as much as I will continue to miss them, I don’t think I want this to end.”

Hannibal let out a shaky breath and Will placed his own hand over Hannibal’s before Hannibal continued.

“Theatre trips, clubs, bars. The life here and the flamboyant people we have met has been wonderful. It has, I think for both of us, been a needed salve. We’ve seen that a life being who we are is possible. And being anonymous has been part of that, it has allowed it. But… this life isn’t for us.” Will chuckled, his head throbbing as he wished he had more water. “I think my vacation with the clubs and theatres is over, but, I don’t think I can go home.”

Hannibal looked pensive.

Will nodded and cleared his throat. “I feel the same. So many people and places I love back in England, but here we might just be able to have everything we could ever hope for.”

“I can make that sacrifice, Will. My aunt is thriving in London, she has travelled widely and now is settled. But I’ve had many years with her, and many years of longing for you. I have no wish to remove you from such a new family situation.”

“I have to make that sacrifice,” Will said, a pain in his chest that he knew he might always have to live with. “I have to have you. I have no say in that. In my heart and my soul I need my husband.”

Hannibal nodded, “then we should make plans. We should plan a new life.”

Upstate New York, February 1942

“It’s so good to see you,” Will held out his hand to shake but it was ignored by Aymer, who pulled him into a tight embrace. They held each other for a few long moments before stepping back as the train whistled.

“Is she well?” Aymer asked, concern etched deep in the lines on his ageing face.

Will nodded, though it was hesitant.

The last time either he or Han had seen Aymer had been on one of their few trips back to England, in 1938 for Lady Murasaki’s funeral after a short and unexpected illness. And now he was here, and despite the war, one never became accustomed or numb to death.

He signalled for one of the porters to take Aymer’s luggage and began to lead the way out of the station and to his automobile. It would be at least an hour’s drive to the house, so they had time to go into the details. Though not much had changed since their last exchange of letters.

“Her health is as good as it can be. The tumour was removed, but that… it was too late, I think. And where it was, in her neck, it has made it difficult for her to speak. I’m glad you have come. And I know she will be. She,” Will cleared his tight throat, “she doesn’t have long.”

Aymer gave a reassuring smile but said nothing more as the porter lifted his luggage into the trunk of the car. Will tipped the porter and they both got into the car, then Aymer finally spoke again.

“I didn’t think it would be appropriate to bring my wife. I hope you understand.” Aymer met his eyes but there was regret there.

“Because of Hannibal and I?”

Many years earlier when none of them had returned to England, but instead bought a beautiful, secluded home almost bordering Vermont, it seemed obvious to those with any previous suspicions what had happened. Certainly, when the rumours in the society pages back in London caught wind of their departure, Will was simply the Princess’s private secretary and so it was assumed the rather scandalous affair was between the Princess and Count Lecter.

Only those who knew any of them personally would know that not to be the truth, and the real truth of it wasn’t too hard to guess once the seed of scandal and affair had been put into their minds.

Will could imagine that Sir Reginald breathed a sigh of relief at the scandal he surely felt was inevitable, did not touch his family.

For Aymer, the truth of Will and Hannibal in some ways must be more palatable than gossip that his aunt had taken off with a much younger man. Now the gossip had been many years dead, with nothing new on the subject for the society pages, there had been nothing to keep it alive. They had been lost to obscurity, and then a new war had come and such things seemed all the more trivial.

“She likes you a great deal, Will. As you know.” Aymer explained as Will started the car. “But she didn’t feel it would be appropriate to visit the home of unmarried men.”

Will nodded, taking his meaning. He had stayed in touch via letters and telephone with both Aymer and his family and Alana and hers, and he knew that they all loved him a great deal. But love wasn’t always enough, and he understood that too. Scandal was still scandal.

“The hotel is not far from us, and we have hired a driver for you so you can come and go as you please. Mother has her own entrance, a small wing I suppose. So you don’t even need to-”

“Will, I have… I don’t take any issue with it. I’m just glad of your happiness. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Will shook his head, pulling the car from the station and starting the drive home. “Please, no offence was taken.” He smiled. “I just wanted you to feel comfortable. You are always welcome in our home.”

“Thank you.” Aymer replied.

There was silence until Will pulled onto the highway and then conversation began to flow. Talking over everything from most recent fishing trips to the good health of Aymer’s family. They caught up on their mutual friends, Aymer having seen the Vergers only a few months earlier, the first time since Mason Verger’s funeral a few years ago. Both his widow, sister and heir - Morgan - were doing well. Whilst Will and Alana were in regular contact it was all the better to hear from someone who had seen them in person so recently.

Inevitably, conversation turned to the war. The US had been largely untouched and Will didn’t want to admit how selfishly glad he was. As soon as the war had broken out, old nightmares had returned. Both he and Hannibal revisited trauma long buried, and counted themselves lucky that age - by mere months - as well as ability and lack thereof meant they avoided the draft.

They couldn’t do that again. The idea of being separated and sent back to a front line in a far distant country made both of them cling to each other tighter in the night and shed many tears for those who were not as fortunate. Including Morgan Verger, who from Alana’s last letter had shipped out with the 18th Infantry to Singapore.

That brought a lull in conversation for some time, before Aymer broke it when he acknowledged, “You call her mother now.”

Will nodded, “Yes, for some years. We still go by our assumed names on all but legal matters, so when we moved upstate it was as mother and son, and family friend.”

Aymer nodded, and when Will took a side on glance at him he was pleased to see the slight smile there.

The drive passed quickly and soon Aymer was at Tonia’s side, choosing to go immediately to his aunt’s bedside and check into the hotel later.

He spent much of the next three weeks there with Will and Hannibal, until she passed peacefully in her sleep.

Upstate New York, August 1945

Will woke with a cry, his body covered in sweat. He trembled, hot and cold at once. This was the worst nightmare he’d had in a long time, and each one brought back vivid memories of the war, the death he’d seen. The thought that he’d lost Hannibal.

Catching his breath, Will lay back down and rolled to wrap himself around Hannibal, only to find his husband shaking as he quietly sobbed.

“It’s over,” Hannibal muttered, barely more than a whisper.

“It is, it is,” Will agreed, his own anxiety easing in favour of caregiving. “It’s all over.”

Hannibal continued to sob in his arms, his own tears wetting Hannibal’s shoulder. Relief and heartbreak. It was finally over, all the horrors that revisited them nightly, the horrors faced by all those young men, a generation almost entirely wiped out for some towns, just like before. It was such a heavy weight to know what it had felt like, and despite how grateful they had been not to be physically pulled into the war, there was a guilt that came with that.

“Everything will be okay,” Will choked out the words before his own throat tightened and they cried together until they both fell back into a fitful sleep.

*

“Do you wish to return to England, Will?” Hannibal asked. He’d found Will once again thumbing through the photo album he’d put together of letters and photographs sent over the years by the Vergers, Blooms, Katz and of course Aymer’s family. “You miss them.”

“I do, miss them. But you know what it was like, last time we were there. We could never have what we have here. England is a small place with no chance of getting lost as we have been able to here.”

Hannibal nodded his agreement. As with Will, he missed people terribly, but not enough to give each other up.

“You’re worried,” Hannibal noted and Will nodded.

“Morgan, I… I wish we could be there for Alana.” Will sighed heavily.

“He may yet return. We did.”

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Happiness, in the end.

Chapter Notes

More skips forward and flashbacks for this final chapter. I hope you've all enjoyed the ride :)

London, December 1971

“Will Graham!” A voice called out through the crowded arrivals lounge. Will pulled Hannibal’s wheelchair to a stop and set his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder so that he knew he was still there as he turned to look around for the voice.

And there he was. A middle-aged man, the image of Alana, and just as distinguished. He walked with a cane but his limp was subtle enough that he might carry it as much for show as for practicality.

“Morgan,” Will greeted the man that strode towards them. They fell into a half embrace, with copious squeezes and backslapping, until Will let go and Morgan crouched down to greet Hannibal.

“My lord,” He inclined his head with a cheeky grin even as he squeezed Hannibal’s arm. A fond familiarity there that spoke of time they had spent together over a decade previously when Hannibal had visited the Vergers. He had felt compelled, Will understood, knowing the pain Morgan had been in. Hannibal had felt uniquely qualified to support the young man as he’d struggled to recover from the injuries he’d suffered during the war.

“Brat,” Hannibal replied, “is this how you treat your elders?”

Morgan laughed and stood once more as Will squeezed Hannibal’s shoulder, hearing the wheeze in his speech. The travelling had taken it out of him but he had insisted, and Will understood.

They had made their home in America but something of them still remained here, and since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1968, they had considered returning. And now, as

Hannibal's health began to fail, it was time. They had perhaps a few years left at best, before his wonderful great heart gave out.

They counted themselves lucky. In the same way Will was sure Morgan likely counted his blessings everyday since being liberated after over a year in a Japanese POW camp.

They had all come home when many hadn't. And whilst it had been a complicated and painful journey from their first kiss to their happy ending, they had it. They had gotten there and no one could take it away from them. Not even now, in this place, where once they were criminals simply for loving each other.

"Mother has put me at your disposal," Morgan explained as he took up their small case, the rest of their belongings being shipped, including a few choice pieces of furniture that Hannibal would have hated to leave behind, harpsichord included.

"Thank you, that's very kind. We booked into a hotel here in London for the night." Will explained as Morgan nodded.

"Mother mentioned. You'd be more than welcome to stay with Miriam and I, though I expect the children might be a little too noisy for you."

Will smiled as Hannibal chuckled.

"We love children, but we also enjoy naps." Will explained as he released the brake and they all began to move on.

"I'll take you to your hotel and let you recover from the flight. We can leave any time tomorrow for the estate. Mother and Aunt Margot already have the cottage totally prepared for you. If you need more time in London, we can make arrangements. Mother has everything arranged to the very last detail."

Will smiled and nodded, his throat tight remembering the last time the four of them had been together. Years ago now, a lifetime ago. A different life now, another phase.

There had been so many of them. More than Will had thought possible, as he reflected back on his childhood on the farm. A different world.

Palm Springs, September 1956

"You can still change your mind," Tab crooned behind Will as he stood adjusting his tie in the mirror. He smirked at their reflections and shook his head, knowing his young friend was joking, teasing.

Despite being over twice his age, Will and Hannibal had become good friends with the young actor over the last couple of years of taking vacations in Palm Springs. Not just Tab, but several other younger men who, because of their prominent lives, were unable to even chance having what he and Hannibal had.

"Don't be cute," Will chided, turning and pinching the young man's cheek. Will was sixty now, not exactly the spring chicken Tab was at a youthful 25, but he felt it today. "And you

know what?" Will asked.

"You're already an old married couple?" Tab continued to tease.

"Exactly. And this isn't even legal. But I wouldn't change today for anything."

Tab grinned at him and ducked his head, blushing a little. Perhaps Will had become the charming older man Hannibal always accused him of being.

"You're out of luck there," Alana chuckled from the doorway. "Sweet young boy that you are."

Tab and Will both chuckled and Tab shook his head. "Too old for me anyway."

"Hey!" Will admonished, to which Alana then laughed.

"As if anyone ever had a chance from the moment you met Hannibal Lecter." She smiled fondly at Will in the mirror, a smile he returned as his heart swelled.

"As if."

*

"Thank you," Hannibal said.

Chiyoh fastened the cufflink on the sleeve of his good arm and then passed him the other, smiling fondly.

With his good hand, Hannibal began to fasten the other cufflink in place.

"Your aunt, she would have been happy to see you happy, you know that." She told him, soft yet firm, and he nodded. He did know it, not that he'd ever said anything wholly outright to her. They'd never had that sort of relationship, even if they had been close.

Something went unspoken between him and Chiyoh, and Hannibal understood the sentiment they were both hesitant to voice. That perhaps had times been different, had they been born later. Things were easier for them now, maybe not better per se, but they could get by under the radar in a way. Even when it was obvious, as in their small upstate New York town with two men living in a secluded house together, nothing was said. A mass conspiracy of silence that would be maintained as long as they behaved in socially acceptable ways. Something that would have been impossible for them in England.

"It's time," Chiyoh's words broke through his thoughts and he fumbled his cufflink, dropping it on the floor. She quickly scooped it up and put it back in his hand - something he so greatly appreciated. She understood how much he wanted to be able to do for himself.

"All these years and you're still so nervous. It's very sweet." she grinned and opened the door. "I don't think he will jilt you."

“I hope not,” Hannibal chuckled, fastening the link and following her out onto the private beach.

This beach house belonged to what Will called one of their ‘Hollywood Friends’ not that it was an exaggeration. They might have met in Palm Springs but all their young friends on this side of the country were as well known as they were private. They each added an element of fun exuberance to Will and Hannibal’s visits, as Hannibal imagined it might feel to have children. Younger people to keep you active, though their own children might not have been the rascals that some of these fellows were.

Hannibal felt light as he stepped down to sand, seeing Will already there, with an unofficial celebrant of their acquaintance. Around them stood the small group, a circle of friends - Alana and Margot, Tab, a few others from California. A regret indeed that they could not openly invite Aymer and other family and friends. But this was a blessing, Hannibal knew that. It was enough.

Will held out his hand and Hannibal went to him. They might have been married in their hearts for decades, and this might not be legal, but to finally in some external way be able to express their dedication to each other in this way was perfection.

*

“Oh god, unfm, Hannibal!” Will groaned and lifted his leg slightly. They were spooned together as Hannibal eased himself into Will. A blissful and pleasing end to their wedding day.

Even more so when Hannibal snaked his good hand around and took hold of Will, stroking leisurely and in perfect time with his thrusts.

“You feel so good,” Hannibal muttered against his shoulder. “How do you always feel this good?”

“Clearly I age like a fine wine,” Will teased, breathless, letting out another low groan when Hannibal moved again.

He was glad, at least, that their friends were used to all sorts of sounds in the rented beachside villa and were very discreet. Will didn’t feel like being teased in the morning.

That thought was very present in his mind as Hannibal hit that place of pleasure within him that had him crying out, loud. Loud enough that it resounded around the room, making Hannibal grunt louder in response as he moved harder and deeper within Will.

“Damn, Hannibal…” Will groaned, burying his face against the pillow and feeling the tight grip of Hannibal’s hand on his cock, squeezing and stroking.

“You’re everything to me,” Hannibal puffed against his neck, “my husband, my husband…”

Will felt the same way, but when he tried to say the words they were caught in his throat. Between the intense emotion and the even more intense pleasure as he shuddered and came

over Hannibal's hand.

He felt the puffs turn to grunts as Hannibal pushed through his tightening channel and spilled with a low groan, trembling at Will's back.

They breathed together, Will's back to Hannibal's chest as they came down from their mutual climax.

"Finally made an honest man of me," Will teased, breathless.

"It's about time," Hannibal mumbled, his words tickling the nape of Will's neck. "After living in sin for so many years."

Hannibal was deadpan but soon chuckled when Will began to. They laughed together as Hannibal softened inside him as he had so many times before.

The Verger Estate, January 1972

"Happy Birthday," Will leaned in and kissed his cheek as he set the two whiskey glasses on the low table between the two rocking chairs on the porch of their little cottage.

Hannibal murmured dismissively, having managed to avoid Will making too much of a fuss all day. At least he hadn't told Alana and Margot, they would have been insufferable and insisted on doing *something*.

His reaction, something that had become harder to conceal over the years, must have been very clear from Will's chuckle.

Will eased himself into the other rocking chair and pulled the thick blanket over him. In the last month it had become something of a tradition for them to watch the sunset over the woods at the edge of the estate, though Hannibal looked forward to the days growing warmer.

"Come on," Will pressed, and Hannibal could sense his grin without looking over. "It's not every day you turn Seventy--"

"Do not complete that sentence, Will." Hannibal grumbled, which was met with a chuckle.

"Of course, m'lord," Will teased, and made as much of a mock sweeping bow as a seated septuagenarian could. "I am but your humble servant."

Will was still chuckling when Hannibal turned to look at him, enjoying the flush of his cheeks and the sparkle in his eyes that reminded Hannibal of when they were young.

"You're not, you know." Hannibal countered, fixing Will with a stern gaze.

"What?" Will chuckled, his brow furrowing.

"You never were, never could be."

"Be what?" Will asked, now looking truly baffled.

“My servant.” Hannibal said firmly.

Will laughed and shook his head, “Please, Hannibal. It was a joke. Besides, those years are long behind us. Need I remind you that I was always against being your servant, and the only time I was it was mandated by war!”

“No,” Hannibal sighed, frustrated at not being able to make himself understood. Sometimes his thoughts were a little jumbled, and sometimes he started sentences half way through, not realising the first part had not been said aloud. But this was different, he thought he had been clear. “You were never… When we were children you might have been raised by farmers but you were always more. And in the war. And after, you were always more. Your mother--”

“Sounds elitist,” Will taunted.

Hannibal shook his head, “regardless of your family, real or adopted. You were always better than me. A better man. The best man. The best man I’ve ever known. And I was… If there is a god or some other entity out there that governs humanity, I know that they put on this earth only to serve you.”

“Hannibal,” Will’s word was soft and he reached across and took Hannibal’s hand.

Silence descended and, gloved hand in gloved hand they watched the English sunset.

Back where they had started all those years ago. With so much time and trauma in between but, moreover, love. More love than either of them had ever expected to experience.

“I’m yours, Will.” Hannibal said, squeezing Will’s hand. “I’m your humble servant.”

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